**THE DIAMOND IN THE RITZ**

**Page: http://www.shmoop.com/diamond-as-big-as-ritz/**

**INTRODUCTION**

**The Diamond as Big as the Ritz**

In A Nutshell

You probably know [F. Scott Fitzgerald](http://www.sc.edu/fitzgerald/) as the author of the famous novel [*The Great Gatsby*](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/literature/f-scott-fitzgerald/the-great-gatsby.html), but he's also well known for his many short stories published in the 1920s and 30s. "**The Diamond as Big as the Ritz**" is one of his quirky, imaginative fantasy stories that also functions as social satire. It is the tale of a man who has discovered a giant mountain made of solid diamond – a diamond as big as the [Ritz-Carlton Hotel](http://www.ritzcarlton.com/en/Default.htm) – and now needs to keep it hidden from the world at all costs. The story is set in the woods of Montana and may be influenced by a trip Fitzgerald took to the area one summer with a buddy from Princeton University.  
  
Fitzgerald originally wrote "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" as a novelette (a very short novella, or a very long short story) called "The Diamond in the Sky." It was rejected by several magazines, so he tried trimming it down. It was then accepted and first published in June of 1922 in *The Smart Set*, an American literary magazine, though they paid him only $300 for it. (Compare this to the $1,500 that the *Post* was then paying for short stories, or the $4,000 dollars Fitzgerald got for "[Babylon Revisited](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/literature/f-scott-fitzgerald/babylon-revisited.html)" in 1931). Shortly after in 1922, it was anthologized in a collection of Fitzgerald's stories called [*Tales of the Jazz Age*](http://www.amazon.com/Tales-Jazz-Age-Scott-Fitzgerald/dp/1603550992/ref=pd_bbs_sr_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1233340470&sr=8-1) (where you can also find "[The Curious Case of Benjamin Button](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/literature/f-scott-fitzgerald/the-curious-case-of-benjamin-button.html)").  
  
Part of the reason so many magazines initially rejected "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" is that the story has not-so-subtle satirical messages about American capitalism. The story criticizes Americans as obsessed with wealth, and considers exploitation inherent in building and expanding the country. American critics didn't react well to the story upon publication. After all, who likes being told they're greedy and exploitive?  
  
But Fitzgerald didn't seem too fazed by these reactions. He said of the story: "[It] was designed utterly for my own amusement. I was in a mood characterized by a perfect craving for luxury, and the story began as an attempt to feed that craving on imaginary foods" (*Jazz Age Stories*, F. Scott Fitzgerald).

**Why Should I Care?**

Picture this – it's the early 1920s, and the wealthy elite of America are having a giant party. As in, a decade-long party. There's lots of drinking, dancing, singing, mingling, and at the top of the social food chain are the ultra-rich. The wealthy elite live such a glamorous, stylish lifestyle that it's hard not to envy them. Who *wouldn't* do just about anything to get to this position?  
  
You can think of "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" as a big fat reality check. It's the literary equivalent of [Fitzgerald](http://www.sc.edu/fitzgerald/) standing back, holding out his arms, and going, "Hold on a second, people – let's just take a minute to think." He takes a look at just what people seem willing to do to become one of the ultra-rich – and it's not a pretty picture. The problem is, the story explains, it's part of America's culture – from its founding fathers onward – to preach success at any cost. It's not so much the success that troubles Fitzgerald, but the "at any cost" bit. A lot of times, in order to climb just a little bit higher, we have to step on somebody. Or many somebodys.   
  
A lot has changed since the 1920s, but lots is also still the same. We're still bred for success, from pre-school on forward. You're taught to go out there, grab the world by the horns, and *succeed*. Competition is naturally part of this process. But "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" demands that we take a look back and recognize how much all this success, status, and wealth really costs.

**SUMMARY**

**The Diamond as Big as the Ritz Summary**

How It All Goes Down

John T. Unger is a sixteen-year-old boy from an affluent family in Hades, Mississippi on his way to St. Midas' preparatory school in Boston, the most exclusive and expensive prep school in the world. There, he hobnobs with the wealthy and meets another student named Percy Washington. Percy invites John to spend the Summer with his family "out West," and John, who loves being with the super-wealthy, agrees.  
  
On the train wide West, Percy reveals that his father is the richest man in the world. He has a diamond the size of the [Ritz-Carlton Hotel](http://www.ritzcarlton.com/en/Default.htm). John soon discovers that Percy is telling the truth. Percy's father, Braddock T. Washington, has built an enormous *château* on a mountain that is literally one solid, flawless diamond. The diamond sits in the middle of five square miles in the woods of Montana – the only part of the country that has never been surveyed. The United States doesn't know that these five square miles exist at all, and the Washingtons plan on keeping it that way.  
  
As a guest at the enormous estate, John soon learns the history of the Washington family. Braddock's father, Colonel Fitz-Norman Culpepper Washington, discovered the diamond mountain shortly after the [Civil War](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/history/us/the-civil-war.html) had ended. He realized he was in a bit of a pickle: by owning the diamond, he was the richest man in the world. But if anyone ever discovered the diamond, it would lose its value, as diamonds would no longer be a rare gem. (The diamond is so large that it would essentially flood the market.) So he decided to hide its existence, at all costs. He brought slaves out from his home in Virginia after convincing them that the South had won the Civil War and that slavery was still legal.  
  
Braddock inherited the diamond and a large number of slaves from his father, as well as the mission of keeping the diamond hidden. Today, he shoots down any planes that fly overhead and keeps the aviators prisoner in a hole in the ground (though he treats and feeds them well). We learn that, recently, an Italian prisoner escaped, much to Braddock's distress. He sent men after the fugitive, but he's not sure if any one of the men they killed was indeed the wanted man.  
  
John seems to have no issues with the Washingtons' system; he has a grand old time spending the summer enjoying the Washingtons' lavish wealth, great food, and endless stream of servants. He also falls in love with Kismine, Percy's younger sister. The two of them make adorable plans to get married next summer. It's all going just swimmingly until Kismine reveals, accidentally, that her father never allows guests to leave their estate. Instead, he murders them in their sleep, in order to safeguard his diamond. Kismine doesn't seem to think there's anything wrong with this. She thinks that it's only right that she and her siblings should get as much pleasure as possible out of life.  
  
Naturally, John is upset. He and Kismine make plans to run away and elope. Before they can, however, they find themselves under a nighttime attack from about a dozen fighter planes (presumably brought by the Italian who escaped from Braddock's prison). John, Kismine, and her older sister Jasmine escape to the woods. As they leave the *château*, John advises Jasmine to take a pocketful of jewels with her, which she does.  
  
From a safe hiding spot in the woods, John watches a strange sight. Braddock has two of his slaves bring a giant diamond to the top of the mountain. As the fight planes continue to bomb his estate, he holds the diamond up to the sky and attempts to bribe God. He declares that, if God just clears up this whole mess, he will build Him a giant cathedral out of the biggest diamond the world has ever seen. God declines.  
  
So Braddock leads his family into the mountain which, Kismine explains to John, is wired to blow. The whole place goes up in a massive explosion, killing the rest of the Washington family (Percy, Braddock, and Braddock's wife) as well as all the aviators who had landed on the mountain. John, Kismine, and Jasmine, however, are safe in the woods.  
  
After the fireworks are over, the three make their way away from the mountain. When they stop to rest for the next night, John asks Kismine to bring out the jewels she took as they were escaping. Unfortunately, Kismine went for the wrong drawer and accidentally grabbed a handful of rhinestones. This doesn't bother her, however, as she was bored of diamonds and, beside, she thinks being poor for a change might be exciting. The three of them make plans to go live in Hades, where Kismine looks forward to working as a washerwoman. They fall asleep for the night.

**SECTION 1**

**The Diamond as Big as the Ritz Section 1 Summary**

* We meet John T. Unger, a sixteen-year-old who grew up in an affluent family in a small town called Hades, Mississippi. He is now heading off to St. Midas' reparatory school outside of Boston – the most expensive and exclusive prep school in the world.
* The night of his departure, John says a tearful good-bye to his parents, who advise him to remember who he is and where he comes from.
* So John heads off to prep school. Two years pass uneventfully. John spends his summers with the other (much more wealthy) boys at various fashionable locales. He is struck by how all of his friends' rich fathers seem to be all the *same*.
* In John's second year at St. Midas', a new student enrolls. His is a "quiet, handsome" boy named Percy Washington (1.12).
* Percy keeps mostly to himself, but chooses to form a friendship with John. He always keeps quiet about his family and hometown – even to John.
* Eventually, Percy asks John to spend the summer with him in his home "in the West" (1.12). John agrees.
* Finally, once they are in the train, alone together, on the way to Percy's home, Percy starts talking about his family. "My father," he says, "is the richest man in the world" (1.14).
* John doesn't know what to say, so he starts rattling off figures about how many millionaires there are in the world.
* But Percy quickly silences him by establishing that his father is much, much richer than all of them put together.
* John is glad about this. "I like very rich people," he says (1.21). "The richer a fella is, the better I like him" (1.22).
* Finally, Percy reveals that his father has one enormous diamond. A diamond as big as the Ritz-Carlton Hotel.

**SECTION 2**

**The Diamond as Big as the Ritz Section 2 Summary**

* The train arrives in Montana in "the village of Fish," a mysterious small town occupied by twelve men (2.1). Every once in a while, the transcontinental train on which Percy and John are now riding stops in this village of Fish, and the men who live there congregate to see the rare event. The narrator makes the point that these men of Fish are without religion, so they impart no spiritual significance to this strange, ritual occurrence.
* Percy and John disembark and, in front of the twelve men of Fish, get into an old buggy and drive away from the depot.
* After about half an hour of buggy driving in the dark of night, the black driver pulls the buggy over. They are approached by a huge, magnificent, gleaming automobile, greater than anything John has ever seen. Two black men get out of the automobile, "dressed in glittering livery such as one sees in pictures of royal processions in London" (2.5).
* As the men transfer all their luggage, Percy explains to John that they couldn't get into the car right at the depot. It would never do for the men of Fish to realize that there was a family living nearby with that kind of wealth. While John gushes over the car, Percy writes it off as a piece of old junk that they use as a station wagon.
* The boys travel for over an hour, heading towards a break between two mountains in the distance. Finally, they come to a stop at a small cliff. They meet up with several more black men who, with a series of cables and ropes, lift the car up to the plateau that was above them.
* Percy tells John that this is where the United States ends. They are in the middle of the Montana Rockies, but inside five square miles of the county that has never been surveyed. It turns out that Percy's family has been protecting these five square miles from discovery for generations.
* Now there's only one thing his father is afraid of, says Percy: airplanes.
* The family shoot down anyone who flies overhead and then keep the aviators prisoner. It's a great worry for them, however, that someone might get away some day.
* John begins to wonder what "terrible and golden mystery" lies hidden in these five square miles that must so urgently be protected (2.26).
* Finally, they arrive at Percy's house – a magnificent *château* on the border of a lake and a forest of pine. It's a giant edifice with "a thousand yellow windows" and "many towers", flooded with golden light, the sound of violins, and the fragrance of flowers" (2.28).
* As they ascend the great steps, the front door opens and John is introduced to Percy's mother.
* Inside John is dazzled by the diamond-covered walls; the opulence of the interior is described in excessive detail.
* John is so overwhelmed that he falls asleep at dinner with Percy's family. He wakes up in bed, where the servants have placed him, to find Percy standing over him. He apologizes for ever having doubted that Percy indeed had a diamond as big as the Ritz.
* Percy explains that the diamond *is* the mountain on which their house rests. But before he can respond, John falls asleep again.

**SECTION 3**

**The Diamond as Big as the Ritz Section 3 Summary**

* John wakes up the next morning to find a servant waiting. The servant asks if he's ready for his bath, and then removes John's clothes and pushes a button that gently dumps John from his bed into a bath that's waiting ready beside him.
* The servant than asks if John would like to watch a movie while he has his bath. John declines, and instead focuses on the beautiful sound of flutes emanating in from outside the window.
* After his bath, John is treated to a shave and a haircut. He finally makes his way to his own personal living-room, where Percy is waiting for him, smoking in an easy chair.

**SECTION 4**

**The Diamond as Big as the Ritz Section 4 Summary**

* While they have breakfast together, Percy tells John a bit about his family history.
* Percy's grandfather – his father's father – was Colonel Fitz-Norman Culpepper Washington. He was a direct descendent of both George Washington and Lord Baltimore.
* When the Civil War ended, Colonel Washington, then 25-years-old, left his plantation to his younger brother and set out West. He took with him two-dozen slaves who worshipped him.
* After a month in Montana, the Colonel loses his way while he is out riding. Finding himself very hungry indeed, he tries to shoot a squirrel for dinner. The squirrel gets away, but drops the acorn it was carrying.
* The acorn turns out to be not an acorn, but rather an enormous flawless diamond. Colonel makes his way back to his camp, gathers his men, and brings them back to the mountainside to start digging near where he encountered the squirrel and the giant diamond.
* To protect himself, he tells his slaves that he discovered an enormous rhinestone mine. None of them knows the difference.
* Of course he quickly discovers that the mountain is not a diamond mine; rather, it is itself one gigantic diamond. He takes a few bags of stones chiseled off the sides and travels back East to sell them off. He has to keep the larger ones hidden, because they practically cause riots when seen by the public.
* By the time Colonel Fitz-Norman Culpepper Washington gets back to Montana, the rumor mill is wild with stories of a new diamond mine – it's just that no one knows where it is.
* Fitz-Norman takes a moment to think. He's in a pickle. He is the richest man who has ever lived, but if anyone ever finds the diamond mountain, diamonds will lose all their value (because the gem will no longer be a rare or scarce commodity). He realizes that the most important thing he has to do is keep the mountain hidden.
* So Fitz-Norman brings his brother out to Montana and keeps him in charge of the slaves. Meanwhile, he tells all his slaves that the South beat the North in a post-war resurgence and that slavery is legal. They believe him.
* With his brother holding down the fort, Fitz-Norman is free to travel the world selling his diamonds. He sells them to various royalty in Europe, but is always afraid for his life as he does so (lest someone kill him for the valuable gems he's carrying with him).
* Things go on like this. Eventually, Fitz-Norman marries and has a son. Then he is "compelled [by] a series of unfortunate complications to murder his brother, whose unfortunate habit of drinking himself into an indiscreet stupor had several times endangered their safety" (4.11). Fortunately, "very few other murders stained these happy tears of progress and expansion" (4.11).
* When Fitz-Norman died, his son, Braddock Tarleton Washington, Percy's father, continued the work of his father. He converted all the wealth into the most expensive element in the world – radium – so that a billion dollars could be efficiently stored in a tiny cigar box.
* Three years after his father's death, Braddock decides that they have enough wealth to last, roughly speaking, forever. He seals up the mine and sets his sights on forever concealing the diamond mountain.
* And that's the story of the Washingtons.

**SECTION 5**

**The Diamond as Big as the Ritz Section 5 Summary**

* After breakfast, John heads outside to survey the incredible landscaping around the house. There he encounters the most beautiful girl he's ever seen.
* She turns out to be Kismine, Percy's younger sister.
* John has always been turned off by flaws of any kind in any girl he's ever known; but Kismine seems absolutely perfect to him.
* As they chat, Kismine talks about her family. Her father has never punished his children for anything, she says, as he doesn't believe in it.
* Kismine talks about her older sister, Jasmine, who is coming out soon (as a *debutante*). Kismine herself, the younger sister, is heading to New York for finishing school in the Fall.
* The two of them flirt while talking, and it's clear that romance is blossoming.

**SECTION 6**

**The Diamond as Big as the Ritz Section 6 Summary**

* We cut to an afternoon with John, Percy, and Mr. Washington. Percy's father is showing John around the grounds; he points out the slave quarters. John has a hard time making conversation with this man of such excessive wealth.
* Braddock explains that all their servants are descendants of the original slaves that his father brought with him from Virginia, and that they only brought a few of them up to speak English. The rest of them use their own dialect.
* He then continues the tour with the golf course, which has no hazards (water, sand, etc.) whatsoever.
* Onward they move – to a cage in the ground where Washington is holding prisoner all the aviators he has shot down. He is irritated that one of the men – whom he took out of the cage to teach his daughter Italian – has escaped.
* Braddock sent two dozen henchmen to track and kill the escaped prisoners, but he can't be sure that any one of the men they all killed was the fugitive he sought.
* When he opens the top of the cage in the ground, the men all shout up to Washington. Naturally, they would like to go home and resent being held against their will. Washington explains to John that he treats them all well, and that if there were any way to guarantee his mountain would be kept a secret he would let them all go. Braddock tells the men that, if they come up with such a solution, he will happily let them go.
* After playfully arguing with the men, Braddock closes the prison and continues his tour.

**SECTION 7**

**The Diamond as Big as the Ritz Section 7 Summary**

* It is now July, and John and Kismine are in love. They share their first kiss.
* They decide to get married.

**SECTION 8**

**The Diamond as Big as the Ritz Section 8 Summary**

* Every day Mr. Washington and the two boys go hunting in the woods, or fishing, or playing golf together.
* John finds that Mr. Washington is uninterested in any opinions other than his own, and that Mrs. Washington is aloof and indifferent to her two daughters, yet interested in her son, Percy. We learned from Kismine that she is a Spaniard, and she holds lengthy, rapid, unintelligible conversations over dinner with her son in Spanish.
* We learn that Jasmine – the third sibling – looks like Kismine (though less perfect) but has a very different temperament. She always wanted to go to Europe to work as a canteen expert during World War I and was disappointed when the conflict ended. She doesn't have quite the same degree of arrogance that Kismine and Percy inherited from their father.
* When John expresses his admiration for the landscape, Percy explains that his father captured a landscape gardener, an architect, a designer, and a French poet to design it. They didn't do such a great job, in part because they were being held against their will. He ended up getting a "moving-picture fella" who did a decent job, though (8.6).
* As the month of August draws to a close, John regrets that he'll have to leave soon to go back to school. He and Kismine talk about eloping next June.
* It's all going great until Kismine accidentally mentions the other guests they've had stay with them for the summer.
* It soon comes out that Braddock always murders his children's guests before they can leave the estate – to make sure that the secret of his diamond mountain is never revealed.
* Naturally, John is horrified at his impending death. But Kismine thinks that "it's only natural" that she and her family "get all the pleasure out of [their guests] that they can" before they are murdered (8.33).
* Anyway it's never been a problem, she says – father always does it before she or Jasmine or Percy know it's time, that way they never have to deal with any tearful good-byes or anything. Apparently he just poisons the guests in their sleep. Besides, she says, she doesn't want to see John die, but she would rather have him murdered than ever kiss another girl.
* She laments that she told John all of this, because now it will spoil their fun for the rest of the summer.
* John is furious; he wants nothing more to do with Kismine. But he quickly realizes it is in his best interest to tell her that he still loves her and plan for the two of them to run away together. They do just that.

**SECTION 9**

**The Diamond as Big as the Ritz Section 9 Summary**

* Long after midnight, John jerks awake. He hears a noise outside his bedroom door.
* He rushes outside and sees at the end of the hallway Mr. Washington standing inside the elevator. There are three slaves in the hallway; John is certain that they were there to execute him.
* Before John can do or say anything, Mr. Washington orders the three men into the elevator with him. The men depart, leaving John alone in the hallway. He knows that "something portentous" must have occurred to have "postponed his own petty disaster," yet he has no idea what that something is (9.7). He decides, this is a good time to make his escape with Kismine – while the men of the house are distracted.
* John makes his way to Kismine's room. She tells him that at least a dozen planes flew overhead, probably sent by the Italian prisoner who escaped. They decide to go up the roof and watch the excitement. In the elevator, John kisses her.
* Outside a great battle rages; the airplanes fire down ammunition at the great Washington estate.
* John astutely decides that they'd better get while the getting is good.
* As the entire slave quarters are bombed, Kismine laments that "there goes fifty thousand dollars' worth of slaves […] at pre-war prices. So few Americans have any respect for property," she adds (9.24).
* John pulls her away from the spectacle. Kismine adds that the should wake Jasmine and take her with them. Meanwhile, she titters with the excitement that now they will be poor – free and poor, and won't it be fun?
* John tells her that it is impossible to be both free and poor together, and that he would rather be free. As such, he tells her to take a handful of diamonds from her jewel box before they depart.
* Ten minutes later, John, Kismine, and Jasmine make their way out of the palace and into a safe, hidden spot in the woods, from which they can safely watch the destruction.

**SECTION 10**

**The Diamond as Big as the Ritz Section 10 Summary**

* It is three in the morning as the three fugitives watch the fight from their spot in the woods. Jasmine falls off to sleep against a tree. After about an hour of bombing, the planes circle closer to the ground and the fighting starts to slow. Kismine, too, falls asleep.
* John remains awake and, after some time has passed, begins to sense that others are present nearby. He peers through the trees and spots Braddock Washington standing in a clearing. The sun is just starting to rise, and so his figure is silhouetted against the brightening dawn.
* Washington lifts his hand above his head and calls out, "You there!" several times.
* At first, John doesn't know what's going on. Is Braddock praying? he wonders. He sees two slaves standing with Washington and raising a huge object to the sky.
* Finally, he figures out what's up. The slaves are holding a giant diamond up to the sky, and Washington is trying to bribe God.
* Braddock proceeds to detail, to God, exactly what he will provide him, should God smite all the airplanes and save his estate. The list includes a giant diamond chapel with an altar of radium, the greatest monument ever built to God.
* When Washington finishes, there is a dull rumble of thunder in the distance. That's it. God has refused the bribe.
* The airplanes land to complete their attack as morning comes. John wakes the two girls and they make their way off the mountain as quickly as they can.
* They stop at some point to look back. John sees Mr. Washington, the two men with the giant diamond, Mrs. Washington, and Percy making their way slowly down the peak of the mountain. They open a trap door in the side of the diamond mountain and go inside.
* John speculates, aloud, that this must be a secret underground escape route. No, sobs Kismine, when she realizes what is going on – the mountain is wired to blow.
* Just as she says this, the mountain blows up. All the attacking aviators who had started their way up the diamond mountain are blown up along with everything else.

**SECTION 11**

**The Diamond as Big as the Ritz Section 11 Summary**

* At sunset that day, John, Kismine, and Jasmine stop to have the remainder of the food Jasmine had brought with her.
* After supper, John asks Kismine to bring out the jewels that she took with her from the house. If she did well, he says, the three of them will be set to live comfortably for the rest of their lives.
* Kismine pulls out a handful of glittering stones.
* Unfortunately, they are rhinestones.
* Kismine emptied the wrong drawer into her pockets.
* She finds this funny, however, as, being bored with diamonds, she thinks rhinestones are more interesting.
* John plots for them to go live in Hades, then, where they will probably have to work for a living. Jasmine perks up – she loves washing clothes, so she can be a washwoman.
* Kismine wants to know if they have washwoman in Hades. Then she wants to know if her father will be there.
* John explains that her father is dead, and that she is confusing Hades with "with another place that was abolished long ago" (11.24).
* When they get ready to go to sleep that night, Kismine muses that all that happened seems to her a dream, especially her wealthy youth.
* It was a dream, says John – that's what youth is, "a form of chemical madness" (11.28). "At any rate," he concludes, "let us love for a while. […] That's a form of divine drunkenness that we can all try. There are only diamonds in the whole world, diamonds and perhaps the shabby gift of disillusion. Well, I have that last and I will make the usual nothing of it" (11.30). He makes sure they are all warm, and then the three of them drift off to sleep.

**THEMES**

# Theme of Wealth

Wealth is the object of scrutinizing social satire in "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz." In this story, America is a country obsessed with wealth to a gaudy, destructive, and shameful degree. Wealth has replaced religion; men worship at the altar of diamonds and gold. Horrible things are done in the name of wealth, including imprisonment and murder, and these actions are written off as natural consequences of success and expansion. The detrimental consequences of such an obsession are made clear. Wealth can be its own prison, the narrative argues, and blindly chasing it dehumanizes its pursuers and devalues human life.

## Questions About Wealth

1. How does John feel about wealth at the end of the story as compared to at its start?
2. Consider Fitzgerald's opinion on wealth as expressed in other works, specifically [*The Great Gatsby*](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/literature/f-scott-fitzgerald/the-great-gatsby.html) and " [Babylon Revisited](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/literature/f-scott-fitzgerald/babylon-revisited.html" \t "_blank)." Are the views expressed in those works consistent with those expressed here in "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz"?
3. Are the Washingtons morally corrupt because they are wealthy, or did they only get filthy rich because they were morally corrupt? (This questions is a little bit like the chicken/egg question.)
4. Diamonds are a natural resource, but how much of the Washington estate is natural? What is the relationship between wealthy men and the natural world around them?

# Theme of Visions of America

Fitzgerald paints a critical view of society in "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz." In this story, America is a place where the blind pursuit of wealth has replaced religion. Americans deify the rich and worship at the altar of money. It is a bleak landscape, where success and its pursuit have replaced morality. Fitzgerald creates an allegory for the expansion of America, particularly into the West, and argues that such expansion was at the cost of human values and human life. He critiques America's history of slavery as well, and doesn't shy away from implicating the founding fathers (like George Washington) as sharing in the blame.

## Questions About Visions of America

1. What specific words does Fitzgerald use to describe the natural landscape, first of Hades, and later of Montana? What effect does this have in contrasting the two settings?
2. Compare the vision of America that Fitzgerald presents in "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" with that presented in [*The Great Gatsby*](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/literature/f-scott-fitzgerald/the-great-gatsby.html). Has his perspective changed between 1922 and 1925?
3. Fitzgerald devotes a lot of text time to describe the situation of the slaves Braddock Washington keeps on his *château*. What importance does this element of the story have in the context of Fitzgerald's social critique?
4. What arguments does Braddock Washington make to justify his behavior (toward the slaves, the prisoners, the murdered guests)? What do you think of his defense?

# Theme of Religion

"The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" is full of religious and mythological allusions, touching on everything from the Bible to Ancient Greek gods. Fitzgerald's story argues that, in America, religion has been replaced by wealth. In other words, Americans worship money, not God. Through very particular stylistic and tonal choices, Fitzgerald gives his story an element of timelessness; it reads like a myth itself. This suggests that the problems satirized in the story are timeless in themselves. Fitzgerald criticizes wealth, and so there an allusion to King Midas. He satirizes man's unstoppable, often destructive desire to reach higher grounds, and so references the mythical figure Prometheus.

## Questions About Religion

1. In this religious allegory, two settings are contrasted: Hades and the Washington estate. Ultimately, which one is Heaven, and which one is Hell?
2. Does Fitzgerald distinguish between religion and mythology in his allusions?
3. Fitzgerald implies (even states a few times) that religion is absent from the world of his short story. What are the consequences of a world without God?
4. What does it mean that God refuses Braddock's bribe? (For example, does this imply that God isn't there? Or that he cannot be bribed? Or something else?)

# Theme of Youth

One reading of "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" is as an allegory for youth. The narrative follows the story of teenager John Unger as he spends the summer with an insanely wealthy family in their opulent *château* in the American West. There, he learns about the nature of wealth and experiences first love. The summer is a haze of diamonds, excess, and luxury, and Fitzgerald argues with his story that all of youth is a similarly hazy, dream-like state – "a form of chemical madness" (11.27). Fitzgerald also takes a look at the way young people experience time. Youth "can never live in the present," he argues, "but must always be measuring up the day against its own radiantly imagined future—flowers and gold, girls and stars, they are only prefigurations and prophecies of that incomparable, unattainable young dream (5.3).

## Questions About Youth

1. What does "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" conclude about the nature of youth? Consider the final few passages in particular.
2. What part does John's age (sixteen) play in establishing his character and determining his reactions to the Washington estate? How would the story be different if John were an adult?
3. Can we blame the Washington children (Percy, Jasmine, and Kismine) for the way they've turned out? Could they help it, given their upbringing and circumstances?
4. What's the deal with Mrs. Washington? Why does she appear to not care about her two daughters, yet dote over her son?

# Theme of Freedom and Confinement

"The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" is the story of a man who owns a diamond so big his only goal in life is to safeguard its existence from the rest of the world. This means imprisoning those who discover it. It makes sense, then, that freedom is an important theme in the text. Part of the irony of this satirical story is that the diamond-owner is himself a prisoner of his own obsession with wealth. Because the story satirizes the expansion of America across the continent, there are implications as to our own founding history. Lastly, many read into "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" parallels to immigration, since the estate containing the diamond (parallel to America) is closed off to all outsides who cannot be used or manipulated for gain.

## Questions About Freedom and Confinement

1. John tells Kismine that you can be either free or poor, but not both. Does the story reject or support this statement?
2. Who is imprisoned in this story, and who is free? How are these terms ("imprisoned" and "free") defined?
3. Why does Washington imprison some men (like the aviators) but kill others (like his children's guests)?
4. Why do Washington, his wife, and his son, choose to go down with the *château*?

## QUOTES

SEE WEBPAGE <http://www.shmoop.com/diamond-as-big-as-ritz/quotes.html>

**CHARACTERS**

**John T. Unger**

John T. Unger begins the story as guilty of wealth-worshipping as anyone else. "I like very rich people," he tells Percy. "The richer a fella is, the better I like him" (1.22). John comes from a town where "the simple piety prevalent […] has the earnest worship of and respect for riches as the first article of its creed," and he seems to have taken this creed to heart (2.12). Upon arriving at the Washington estate, he can do little more than stare in wonder and worship at the extravagant wealth of his friend's family. He is so overwhelmed, in fact, by the sensory cascade of the lavish *château*, that he simply falls asleep at dinner.  
  
To be sure, John is an outsider – both at the Washington estate and in his time at St. Midas'. Sure, his family is affluent, but they live in a small town in Mississippi, where "a function that would be considered elaborate would be doubtless hailed by a Chicago beef-princes as 'perhaps a little tacky'" (1.3). When he goes off to school, he journeys into a new world – a world where wealth reigns supreme. And if St. Midas' is the gateway to this world, the Washington estate is the inner sanctum.  
  
John's time at the Washingtons' estate is interesting, because it's never exactly clear if he's there as a guest or as a prisoner. We suspect from the start that he won't be allowed to leave (given the extent to which Braddock has gone to ensure his diamond stays secret), but John doesn't realize this until Kismine gives the game away, nearly at the end of his stay. On the one hand, he is treated like royalty while he's there – but on the other hand, the dark threat of murder or imprisonment hangs overhead the whole time.  
  
One question to consider when thinking about John's character is whether he's learned anything from this mess. After escaping from the *château* with Jasmine and Kismine, he makes plans for his life in Hades. There are several confusing lines here, and we talk about them in our discussion of the ending as a whole in "What's Up with the Ending?" But there is one specific line we'll look at here. After Kismine posits that her entire youth has been a dream, John agrees that this is the nature of being young. Then he adds:  
  
*"There are only diamonds in the whole world, diamonds and perhaps the shabby gift of disillusion. Well, I have that last and I will make the usual nothing of it."* (11.30)  
  
John claims here that he has been disillusioned – and that such disillusionment is *valuable*. Do we believe him? Has he learned his lesson about the dangers of extravagant wealth and the immorality of attaining it on the backs of others? It's hard to say. What is interesting is that John presents this disillusionment as a sort of wealth in itself. Perhaps in this way, then, he is not as poor as he seems to be.

**John T. Unger Timeline and Summary**

* We learn that John is sixteen and grew up in Hades, Mississippi in an affluent family. He is now ready to go to St. Midas' prep school in Boston.
* John has a tearful good-bye with his parents.
* John enjoys hob-nobbing with the wealthy kids at school. He spends summers with wealthy families.
* John becomes friends with the reserved Percy Washington. He accepts an invitation to spend the summer with Percy.
* He travels by train, buggy, and finally automobile to Percy's place in Montana. On the way, he learns that Percy's father has a diamond as big as the Ritz Hotel.
* John is awed by the sights and sounds of the opulent Washington estate. He falls asleep several times in the course of the night.
* The next morning, John hears from Percy the story of the Washington family.
* John meets Percy's sister, Kismine, and thinks she is perfect. Romance blossoms.
* John goes on a tour of the estate with Braddock. He learns about the imprisoned aviators and hears of the escaped Italian prisoner.
* He falls in love with Kismine; they share their first kiss together.
* John learns from Kismine that Braddock intends to murder him before the summer is over. He and Kismine decide to elope together.
* John hears a noise outside his bedroom; he spots Braddock in the hall with three slaves and fears for his life. Then he realizes that the place is under attack. He goes to get Kismine and tells her to put some jewels in her pocket. He escapes with her and Jasmine.
* Out in the woods, John spies on Braddock as he tries (and fails) to bribe God.
* John and the two girls make their way down the mountain. They watch it explode, killing the rest of the Washington family and the attackers.
* He learns that Kismine has brought only rhinestones with her.
* They plan for a life in Hades.

**Braddock Tarleton Washington**

Braddock Washington is the embodiment of the values critiqued in Fitzgerald's satire: an insatiable desire for wealth, the absence of religion, and the will to destroy others for personal gain. Because he descends from George Washington and Lord Baltimore, it's clear that Braddock is in many ways a symbol for America's own founding and expansion into the West (see "Symbols, Imagery, Allegory" for more on this parallel). Given this connection, Braddock's lines of dialogue take in a particular importance. Consider the following two statements:  
  
*"How could a man of my position be fair-minded toward [the imprisoned aviators]? You might as well speak of a Spaniard being fair-minded toward a piece of steak."* (6.37)  
  
*"Cruelty doesn't exist where self-preservation is involved."* (6.44)  
  
This is just the attitude that Fitzgerald critiques with his story. Braddock not only is willing to exploit others for his own purposes, but he also thinks there's nothing wrong with it. He thinks it's "perfectly natural," as Kismine will later say, to get as much as you can out of other people (8.33). This is the attitude, the narrative seems to argue, that led to things like slavery.  
  
Of course, the irony in all of this is that Braddock is himself a prisoner to his own wealth and in his own *château*. Sure, he has the aviators imprisoned below the ground, but he has himself imprisoned in a much larger, much better disguised prison. He is, in many ways, a slave to his own obsession with wealth. His entire life functions around hiding the diamond from others. He serves this obsession flawlessly.  
  
So it's no surprise when Braddock gets his just desserts in the end. After first trying to bribe God (see "Symbols, Imagery, Allegory"), Braddock ends up dying in the explosion of his own giant diamond mountain. It's fitting that actually goes *inside* the mountain to die – it's is his prison so he cannot leave it, even in death. It's also fitting that he goes in voluntarily (just as he's voluntarily committed himself to a prison of his wealth), and that he leads his family in there with him – Braddock is a victim of his own volition.

**Braddock Tarleton Washington Timeline and Summary**

* We learn that Braddock Washington has a diamond as big as the Ritz-Carlton Hotel.
* When Percy Washington tells John his family history, we learn that Braddock inherited the diamond from his father and, deciding that he had enough wealth, sealed it off from further mining. Since then, he's done everything he can do conceal its existence from the world.
* John meets Braddock and finds him to be interested only in his own opinions. Braddock takes John for a tour of the estate, explaining the various methods by which he keeps his mountain secret. One of these methods turns out to be shooting down planes overhead and then imprisoning the aviators.
* Braddock takes John to the prison and then banters back and forth with his underground prisoners. He says that he would be happy to free them, if only they could guarantee their silence. He wishes them no ill will, he insists.
* We learn from Kismine that Braddock always kills any guests at the estate.
* John finds Braddock in the hallway elevator and is afraid for his life.
* After his estate has been attacked by the aviators, Braddock offers God a diamond bribe.
* When God declines to accept, Braddock leads his family into the mountain to die.

**Kismine Washington**

Kismine Washington is Percy's youngest sister and the love interest for our hero. She is, like her father's diamond, flawless. Let's take a look at 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*. (5.11)  
  
Kismine is an extension of the seemingly flawless, beautiful Washington *château*. But like the prison that lies beneath the ground of the estate, a darker secret lies underneath. (Could that sound any more ominous?) Kismine is just using John for the summer – he'll be killed at the end. She knows this, and yet does nothing to stop it. It upsets her, but only in the way having a headache on your birthday would make you upset. She doesn't see anything fundamentally or morally wrong with the picture – she's only depressed that thinking about the matter will take all the fun out of her summer. "It's only natural for us to get all the pleasure out of them that we can first," she tells John (8.33). She claims that she's "honestly sorry" about the whole mess, though admits that she would rather see John "put away than ever kiss another girl" (8.41).  
  
The problem here is that Kismine doesn't understand the value of human life – or death. "We can't 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'd be out here if we never had any one. Why, father and mother have sacrificed some of their best friends just as we have" (8.39). This problem of valuation continues throughout the story. Later, when the slaves quarters' are destroyed in the bombing, she laments, "There go fifty thousand dollars' worth of slaves, at prewar prices. So few Americans have any respect for property" (9.24). Kismine's inability to understand the real value of anything – not just its monetary value – is the result to her upbringing. She's used to being able to buy anything – and we mean *anything* – so it's no surprise that she has little respect for non-monetary value.  
  
Just as her father is made the victim of his own shortcomings, so is Kismine at the end of "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz," when she brings rhinestones in her pockets instead of diamonds. "I think I like these better," she says. "I'm a little tired of diamonds" (11.11). Kismine is indeed tired of her life of luxury and ease, demonstrating once again that money can't buy happiness. She's bored with her life to the point where she's excited about the prospect of being poor. "'We'll be poor, won't we?' she says to John with childish delight, 'free and poor. What fun!'" (9.28).

**Kismine Washington Timeline and Summary**

* John meets Kismine and thinks that she is the most perfect creature he has ever laid eyes on.
* She explains that she's going to finishing school in New York in the fall.
* Kismine chats about her family to John.
* She flirts with John.
* Kismine and John fall in love; they have their first kiss together in July. They want to get married next year.
* In August, Kismine reveals, somewhat accidentally, that her father intends to kill John, just as he's killed all of his other guests. She doesn't think this is a big deal, though she's upset that the news will spoil the fun for her and John in the time they have left.
* John and Kismine decide to elope, the better for keeping John alive.
* John runs to get Kismine when the estate is under attack. She's excited at the prospect of being poor, as she believes it will be great fun. He tells her to empty her jewelry box into her pockets, which she does.
* Kismine, Jasmine, and John escape from the *château* and into the woods. Kismine falls asleep.
* Kismine gets hysterical when she sees the rest of her family go into the mountain, which she explains is wired to blow.
* That night, after they've made their way to safety, Kismine empties her pockets. Turns out that she opened the wrong drawer and took rhinestones instead of diamonds. She thinks that's OK, however, as she was getting tired of diamonds and thinks rhinestones are more interesting.
* Kismine starts planning for her life in Hades with John. She asks if her father is going to be there in Hades; John explains that she's mixed-up.
* Kismine muses that her youth seems to have been a dream. All three of them fall asleep together.

**Percy Washington**

Percy is John's in to a world of luxury, ease, and garish wealth. Though we don't know it at the start, we find out later that Percy willfully brought John to his home to die; he knows full well that his father murders all his family guests. Percy drops out of the story once Kismine enters the picture, so we never get to hear his thoughts on the matter or listen to his attempts at justifying this behavior. We assume, though, that he shares his sister's shallow feelings on the situation. John does conclude, after all, 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" (8.2).  
  
Percy takes on another important role when he fills John in as to the history of the Washington family. This is the part of the text where we start to see the connection between the history of the Washington family and the history of the US. This is where the satire aspect of the story kicks in (see "Symbols, Imagery, Allegory" for a discussion of how this all works). As the hidden narrator of his family's history, Percy provides John – and the reader – with all the background info we need.  
  
We don't get to see anything of Percy in the dramatic bombing scene, but we are told that he goes into the mountain to die with his family. We're not sure how Percy feels about this whole thing, or what his reaction is to the attack. He seems to be fated, however, like his father, to go down with the ship.

**Percy Washington Timeline and Summary**

* Percy arrives at St. Midas' school in Boston. He is reserved and uncommunicative about his home life.
* He befriends John and then invites him home for the summer. On the train ride home, Percy reveals that his rather has a diamond as big as the Ritz Carlton hotel.
* His first morning at the estate, John listens to Percy tell him the history of the Washington family over breakfast.
* Percy goes on a tour of the estate with his father and John. He urges his father to show John the prison.
* We don't hear from Percy again, but he is with his father when the family goes into the mountain right before it all blows up.

**SYMBOLISM/IMAGERY/ALLEGORY**

**"The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" as Satire**

"The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" may be a fun fantasy story, but it's also a major critique of American history and American values. One of the early tip-offs is Percy's explanation that his family descends from George Washington and Lord Baltimore – two men who were integral in the founding and expansion of our country.  
  
The story of Fitz-Norman Washington, Percy's grandfather, quickly becomes a parallel for the expansion of the U.S. into the west. Fitz-Norman set out after the Civil War to seek his fortune; when he found that fortune, he exploited the country's natural resources for his own material gain and then safeguarded that secret through the manipulation and pain of others. The slaves are a key example here. Fitz-Norman took advantage of them by convincing them that the South won the civil war and that slavery was still legal. He then convinced them his giant diamond was a rhinestone mine, and kept all the profits for himself.  
  
Fitzgerald makes the point that material success has its costs – and that those who seek it blindly falsely believe that the exploitation of others is natural for their own purposes. A great example is the passage in which we learn that Fitz-Norman "was compelled, due to a series of unfortunate complications, to murder his brother, whose unfortunate habit of drinking himself into an indiscreet stupor had several times endangered their safety. But very few other murders stained these happy years of progress and expansion," (4.11). Through this hyperbole, Fitzgerald points out how absurd it is to sacrifice human life in the name of material gain.  
  
The giant diamond itself is a symbol in this overarching satire. To begin, it is an emblem of the garish excess of the Washingtons' wealth. Excessively large diamonds are considered vulgar; so a diamond as big as the Ritz is the epitome of tacky glut. It's also significant that Washington built his *château* on top of the diamond – he's built his home, literally, on the mountain of his wealth.

**Religious and Mythological Allegory**

"The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" is full of religious allusions, both explicit and implicit. To begin with is the dichotomy between John's hometown, Hades or Hell, and Percy's home, which in contrast appears to be a spin on the Garden of Eden – paradise.  
  
We know this is an important dichotomy because Fitzgerald keeps reminding us of the religious allusion inherent in the name of John's hometown. To start is the reference to the inscription over the gates of Hades, "an old-fashioned Victorian Motto" that is, admittedly, "a little depressing" (1.8). This is a humorous allusion to the inscription over the gates of Hell: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here." We also notice that everyone keeps jokingly asking John, in reference to his home town, "Is it hot enough for you down there?" (1.11).  
  
On the surface level, this refers to the fact that John is from the South (as opposed to most of the New Englanders with whom he goes to school). But it is also a joking reference to the fact that Hades is Hell, and that Hell isn't exactly known for its air-conditioning. We also notice that, when John leaves home, his father tells him, "We'll keep the home fires burning" (1.5). Finally, at the end of the text, Kismine asks John if her father will be in Hades when they get there. "Your father is dead," he explains to her. "Why should he go to Hades? You have it confused with another place that was abolished long ago" (11.24). The tricky part here is understanding why John, Kismine, and Jasmine willingly look forward to going to Hades at the end of the story. Why would they want to go to Hell, especially having just left the Garden of Eden? Go ahead and read "What's Up with the Ending?", where we discuss the question fully.  
  
Interestingly, we get another reference to Hell about halfway through the text – not in reference to Hades, but rather to the underground prison where Braddock keeps the aviators he's shot down. "Come on down to Hell!" the men call to John when Braddock opens their cage (6.17). This is fitting, since the prison is below ground while "Heaven" (or the Washington estate) is above.  
  
All this Heaven and Hell business is merely one element of the network of religious allusions that runs through "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz." The village of Fish is another, and in fact a rather bizarre segment of the story. It's one of the few places where the narrator breaks from John's point-of-view to comment or explain more objectively what's going on (see "Narrator Point of View"). Let's take a look at this confusing passage:  
  
*The Montana sunset lay between two mountains like a gigantic bruise from which dark arteries spread themselves over a poisoned sky. An immense distance under the sky crouched the village of Fish, minute, dismal, and forgotten. There were twelve men, so it was said, in the village of Fish, twelve somber and inexplicable souls who sucked a lean milk from the almost literally bare rock upon which a mysterious populatory force had begotten them. They had become a race apart, these twelve men of Fish, like some species developed by an early whim of nature, which on second thought had abandoned them to struggle and extermination.  
  
Out of the blue-black bruise in the distance crept a long line of moving lights upon the desolation of the land, and the twelve men of Fish gathered like ghosts at the shanty depot to watch the passing of the seven o'clock train, the Transcontinental Express from Chicago. Six times or so a year the Transcontinental Express, through some inconceivable jurisdiction, stopped at the village of Fish […]. The observation of this pointless and preposterous phenomenon had become a sort of cult among the men of Fish. To observe, that was all; there remained in them none of the vital quality of illusion which would make them wonder or speculate, else a religion might have grown up around these mysterious visitations. But the men of Fish were beyond all religion—the barest and most savage tenets of even Christianity could gain no foothold on that barren rock—so there was no altar, no priest, no sacrifice; only each night at seven the silent concourse by the shanty depot, a congregation who lifted up a prayer of dim, anaemic wonder*. (2.1-2)  
  
The religious allusion is to the twelve disciples of Jesus (who is often associated with the ichthus fish). But the village of Fish is a desolate, barren land, a land "poisoned" and "bruised" and otherwise destroyed (see "Setting" for a full discussion of Fitzgerald's portrayal of the West). This village of religion has abandoned religion. If the men of Fish are "beyond all religion," if "the barest and most savage tenets of even Christianity could gain no foothold on that barren rock," then America truly has turned away from God.  
  
So if Americans aren't worshipping God – what are they worshipping? In a word: money. The religious terms in this story always refer to wealth, not to God. Consider St. Midas' prep, John and Percy's fancy school. They've chosen to make a saint of a king who could turn anything into gold. John reflects that "the simple piety prevalent in Hades has the earnest worship of and respect for riches as the first article of its creed," and that if he deviated from this standard "his parents would have turned away in horror at the blasphemy" (2.12). Money is the new religion in this land – men deify the wealthy and worship at the altar of diamond and gold.  
  
Speaking of altars of diamonds, how about that attempted bribe at the end of the story? Braddock, realizing that his own destruction is at hand, tries to bribe God by promising him a giant diamond. Take a look:  *[Braddock] would give to God, he continued, getting down to specifications, the greatest diamond in the world. This diamond would be cut with many more thousand facets than there were leaves on a tree, and yet the whole diamond would be shaped with the perfection of a stone no bigger than a fly. Many men would work upon it for many years. It would be set in a great dome of beaten gold, wonderfully carved and equipped with gates of opal and crusted sapphire. In the middle would be hollowed out a chapel presided over by an altar of iridescent, decomposing, ever-changing radium which would burn out the eyes of any worshipper who lifted up his head from prayer—and on this altar there would be slain for the amusement of the Divine Benefactor any victim He should choose, even though it should be the greatest and most powerful man alive*. (10.14)  
  
So what does it mean that Braddock's bribe doesn't work? This is tricky question, and we can't give you just one answer. It could be that Fitzgerald is making an argument that religion is so fundamental that it cannot be destroyed by our vapid worship of wealth. God is still there, the story seems to threaten, an we'll all have to own up to our actions at the end. There is certainly a Judgment Day feel about this final scene – the aeroplanes in the sky are described as "a dozen dark-winged bodies in constantly circling course" raining down fire on the land below (9.18). Later, the planes are described as "golden angels alighting from the clouds" (10.22). Braddock is being judged for his sins, and is ultimately forced to pay for them.  
  
Another interpretation for God's refusal is that he simply isn't there. Braddock offers a bribe; no result. This may indeed be a land devoid not only of religion, but of divine presence altogether. We could go a step further and say that the people who dwell in this land and deify wealth have killed God.

**SETTING**

Where It All Goes Down

## Hades, Mississippi; St. Midas' school, outside Boston; the Washington estate in Montana

Most of "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" takes place on the five-square-mile land of the Washington estate, somewhere in the middle of Montana. By all accounts, the Washington *château* appears to be a paradise. Fitzgerald's lavish descriptions characterize the excess and opulence of the flawless chateau and its surroundings. It's hard to read into the estate a reference to the Biblical Garden of Eden – especially in contrast with Hades, or Hell, from where John hails. We talk about this fully in our discussion of religious allegory in "Symbols, Imagery, Allegory," so be sure to check that out.  
  
One of the interesting elements of the Montana setting is the specific imagery Fitzgerald uses to describe the land in which Washington has set his estate. Take a look at the following few pages and see if you can find the common theme we're talking about:  
  
*The Montana sunset lay between two mountains like a gigantic bruise from which dark arteries spread themselves over a poisoned sky*. (2.1)  
  
*Out of the blue-black bruise in the distance crept a long line of moving lights upon the desolation of the land, and the twelve men of Fish gathered like ghosts at the shanty depot to watch the passing of the seven o'clock train, the Transcontinental Express from Chicago. Six times or so a year the Transcontinental Express […] stopped at the village of Fish, and when this occurred a figure or so would disembark […] and drive off toward the bruised sunset*. (2.2)  
  
*After half an hour, when the twilight had coagulated into dark, the silent negro […] hailed an opaque body somewhere ahead of them in the gloom*. (2.4)  
  
*It was apparent that they had surmounted some immense knife-blade of stone*. (2.17)  
  
Terms like "gigantic bruise," "dark arteries," "poisoned sky," "blue-black bruise," "bruised sunset," and "coagulated" sure pack a imagistic punch. Fitzgerald uses the imagery of a physically injured body to describe the Montana landscape, suggesting that something – or perhaps someone – has *hurt* the land. You could interpret this any number of ways. Perhaps, by abandoning God and worshipping at the altar of wealth, the religion-less men of fish have bruised their land. Perhaps men like Washington have poisoned the country by exploiting its resources (like diamonds) for their own purposes. Perhaps you can come up with a third (or fourth) interpretation

**NARRATOR POINT OF VIEW**

Who is the narrator, can she or he read minds, and, more importantly, can we trust her or him?

## Third Person (Limited Omniscient)

For the most part, we experience the bizarre events of this story along with its protagonist, John Unger. We get to hear his thoughts, his perspective, and we generally aren't privy to things outsider of his own range of perception. Because of this, we see the Washington Estate through the eyes of an outsider. The estate is painted as a strange, unknown world because that's what it is to John Unger. Consider how different things would appear if we heard the story through, say, Percy's eyes.  
  
Though we do stick to John's perspective for most of the story, there is the occasional moment where the narrator breaks through and provides us with his pearls (diamonds?) of wisdom. When the village of Fish is described, for example, we know that this is the narrator speaking, not a glimpse into John's thoughts. Another important passage is the slightly cryptic message about youth inserted about halfway through the story ("it is youth's felicity as well as its insufficiency that it can never live in the present" [5.3]).

**GENRE**

## Satire and Parody, Coming-of-Age, Fantasy

"The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" is good old social satire. By exaggerating certain aspects of American culture – the obsession with wealth in particular – Fitzgerald holds his society up to ridicule. By creating a parable to the expansion of the United States across the continent, he also mocks American motives behind and methods for success. The Washingtons, for example, are supposed to be descended from George Washington and Lord Baltimore – two leaders in early American history. Washington's willingness to manipulate and hurt others for his own financial gain is then a dig at the country's own tendency to do the same in its early expansion. (Braddock's slaves are a particularly potent example).  
  
We're also looking at a coming-of-age story, though to a lesser degree. John is sixteen when the story begins and leaving home for the first time. In the course of the narrative, he learns a few lessons (maybe), experiences his first love, and all around grows up.  
  
Lastly, "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" is considered one of Fitzgerald's fantasy stories, mostly because, as far as we know, the existence of a giant diamond mountain in the middle of uncharted, secret territory in the center of Montana is the workings of an imaginative mind

**TONE**

Take a story's temperature by studying its tone. Is it hopeful? Cynical? Snarky? Playful?

## Mocking, Hilarious, Philosophic

"The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" is definitely satirical (see "Genre"), so we expect a certain sarcastic bent to the tone. And that's exactly what we get. Fitzgerald parodies the Washingtons' indifference to the suffering of others and their willingness to sacrifice others for their own success. He does so indirectly. While saying with words that this behavior is perfectly natural, he says with his tone that it's clearly not. Example:  
  
*[Fitz-Norman Washington] was compelled, due to a series of unfortunate complications, to murder his brother, whose unfortunate habit of drinking himself into an indiscreet stupor had several times endangered their safety. But very few other murders stained these happy years of progress and expansion*. (4.11)  
  
Humor aside, Fitzgerald is still Fitzgerald, and he can't help but insert a gem or two of philosophic gold, not to mix our diamond-encrusted metaphors. He manages to sneak in a few comments here and there. He says, for example, that youth is nothing but chemical madness, that one can not be both free and poor, that the young live in the future rather than the present. And we're betting you can find a few more.

**WRITING STYLE**

## Lavish, Hyperbolic

Read through "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" and find every superlative adjective you can, along with all the exaggerated descriptions and over-the-top characterizations. This is a story that is stuffed full with hyperbole – here's what we found on our own foray through the text:  
  
*St. Midas' School is the most expensive and most exclusive boys' preparatory school in the world* (1.10)  
  
*[Percy]: "My father […] is by far the richest man in the world."* (1.14)  
  
*It was the taillight of an immense automobile, larger and more magnificent than any he had ever seen*. (2.4)  
  
*She was the most beautiful person he had ever seen […], the incarnation of physical perfection*. (5.4, 5.11)  
  
Starting to get the picture? If you want to see more, check out any one of the lengthy descriptions of the Washington estate – they're just glutted with showy clauses and expensive adjectives. And that's exactly the point. This is a story about garish excess of every kind – it's only fitting that its prose should be equally all about the bling.

**WHAT IS UP WITH THE TITLE**

The obvious answer is that this story is about a diamond that is, literally, as big as the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. But lest we give Fitzgerald and his title short shrift, we should try to dig a little deeper.

First is the idea of exaggeration. We talk in "Writing Style" about the way that Fitzgerald exaggerates *everything* in this story. It's all about the hyperbole. And that's exactly what's going on in the title; it's not just a large diamond, but a huge, enormous diamond the size of a giant hotel. It's all about garish excess.  
  
Second, comparing the diamond to the Ritz-Carlton Hotel connects the fantasy wealth of the story (a giant diamond) with the wealth of Fitzgerald's American readers (hotels, luxury cars, etc.). It brings in the satirical aspect of the story. In 1922, when Fitzgerald was writing, hotelier Cesar Ritz had recently died (in 1918), but his hotel legacy was gaining its ground. (Fitzgerald himself used to frequent the Ritz Hotel in Paris.) By using the name "Ritz" in the title, Fitzgerald brings to the front of his reader's mind the image of extravagantly wealthy Americans – the subject of the story's satire (see "Symbols, Imagery, Allegory" for a closer look). Incidentally, it's interesting that the benchmark of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel chain would turn out to be the Boston branch – thus an appropriate reference for young Percy – but not until 1927, several years after the story's publication. Fitzgerald's title is even more apt now than it was in 1922.

# What’s Up With the Ending?

## Youth as a Dream

The last page of "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" is where the theme of youth comes into play. As three survivors – John, Kismine, and Jasmine – sit under the stars and plan their penniless future. Kismine makes a cryptic comment: "I never noticed the stars before. I always thought of them as great big diamonds that belonged to some one. Now they frighten me. They make me feel that it was all a dream, all my youth" (11.27). John makes an even more cryptic reply: "It was a dream […]. "Everybody's youth is a dream, a form of chemical madness" (11.27-28).  
  
This sends us back to the only other passage in the story that explicitly discusses youth. As John is enjoying the opulent luxury of the Washingtons, a strong narrative voice interrupts the tale to comment:  
  
*He was enjoying himself as much as he was able. It is youth's felicity as well as its insufficiency that it can never live in the present, but must always be measuring up the day against its own radiantly imagined future—flowers and gold, girls and stars, they are only prefigurations and prophecies of that incomparable, unattainable young dream*. (5.3)  
  
This starts us thinking that, while "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" contains religious allegory and social satire, it is also an allegory of youth. The time John spends at the Washington estate is a sort of dreamy haze – precisely, the narrative seems to argue, like youth itself. It is important that John is a teenager during his time at the *château*, and that he experiences the flush of first love while he is there. The shiny, gaudy opulence of the Washington estate has a lot to do with the excessive, dreamy way we live youth – or so Fitzgerald argues.

## Free and Poor?

As John and Kismine are escaping from the *château*, he tells her that "it's impossible to be both [free and poor] together," adding that he "should choose to be free as preferable of the two" (9.29). By this reasoning, he tells Kismine to take a pocketful of diamonds with them as they leave. The idea is that, if they have the diamonds, they will be rich, and this will allow them to be free.  
  
Except it turns out that Kismine, clearly not fated to be a jeweler, took rhinestones instead. So what does this mean in terms of John's plan? One interpretation is that, since they are now poor, they are necessarily not free. Another is that John was wrong in his assertion and the ending proves it – they escaped from the *château* and are free, despite being poor. Yet another possibility is that the ending forces us to reinterpret the ideas of "freedom" and of "wealth." John has his life and a woman who is ready to be his wife; in this sense, he is "rich." You could also argue that John, despite having escaped from the Washingtons is still captive to his own preoccupation with wealth. The ending leaves it up to you to interpret John's earlier claim on freedom and poverty.

## Going Back to Hell

In "Symbols, Imagery, Allegory," we discus the fact that John is from Hades, which in Greek mythology was another name for Hell. We also take a look at the Washington estate as representing a sort of Garden of Eden-like paradise. At the end of the story, then, we see that John, Kismine, and Jasmine have escaped from Eden, in order to go live in Hell.  
  
That might sound a little backwards. One possibility is that Fitzgerald's characterization of these to locales is ironic; the point being that the Washington estate, which seems like Eden, is really its own form of Hell. (After all, prisoners are held there, no one can escape, and God turns his back as it is attacked.) Hades, on the other hand, can be a sort of Heaven in itself, because it is free of the evils which plague the Washingtons. Another possibility is that Hades really is like Hell, which is a sad (but not unhumorous) conclusion to the story.  
  
The humor comes in when you consider the attitudes of our three remaining survivors as they look forward to their future in Hell. Kismine is excited at the prospect of being poor; John isn't even upset about the fact that she left her diamonds behind; and Jasmine's attitudes is best described as a sort of contented acceptance. "Oh well," they seem to say, "now we're going to be poor for the rest of our lives. No big deal; let's take a nap."  
  
Because of this general attitude, and because of the religious allegory pervading the ending, we can't help but think of [*Candide*](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/literature/voltaire/candide.html), a satire written by Voltaire in 1759. In *Candide*, the story's protagonist and friends undergo a series of awful events – torture, natural disaster, rape, etc. – and yet come out at the end with an oddly optimistic attitude. Voltaire's point was to criticize the philosophy of Optimism, which he did by satirizing its followers. At the end of *Candide*, the various protagonists, crippled and deformed by their various misfortunes, set to work in a garden for the rest of their days. Their attitude is, just like the attitude of John, Kismine, and Jasmine, a sort of contented acceptance. "Oh well," they seem to say, "let's tend to our garden."  
  
There are several ways in which "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" may allude to *Candide* in this final scene. First of all, the characters share the same absurd reaction to misfortune while contentedly anticipating a rather bleak future. You've also got the religious allegory to consider. The garden at the end of Candide certainly refers to the Garden of Eden, which means the characters have arrived at an ironic rendering of an Eden-like paradise. The characters in "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz," on the contrary, have left Eden and instead gone on to Hades, or Hell. It's an ironic twist on what is already an ironic satire – clever stuff, but nothing short of what we expect from Fitzgerald.

# The Diamond as Big as the Ritz Plot Analysis

Most good stories start with a fundamental list of ingredients: the initial situation, conflict, complication, climax, suspense, denouement, and conclusion. Great writers sometimes shake up the recipe and add some spice.

## Initial Situation

### John is off to prep school.

This stage is comprised of the background info on John, his family, and the town of Hades, as well as the time John spends at St. Midas' school. You've also got the anticipatory train ride to consider in this stage.

## Conflict

### Percy's father has a diamond as big as the Ritz, and the diamond must be hidden – at all costs.

The diamond itself isn't a conflict, but there is a seriously conflict-ridden aspect to all this wealth and extravagance. This conflict is evident in every element of the estate and the story of its history, from the slaves who are kept there by deception and exploitation, to the prisoners in the ground, to the fact that old Fitz-Norman murdered his brother to keep his secret safe.

## Complication

### Oh right – John is one of those people.

John doesn't really get the fact that this conflict applies directly to his own life – not until Kismine as much as spells it out for him. But the reader should have an inclination of this complication much earlier in the text – at least by the time we see the prisoners in the ground.

## Climax

### An air strike, escape under cover of night, an attempt to bribe God, and a giant explosion

When an enormous bomb goes off, whether in the realm of English class or action movies, you're probably looking at a climax. In this case, Fitzgerald doesn't hold back. This climax has all the fire power of any good Bruce Willis flick. We can start to see what *Times* critic Donald Adams meant when he wrote that Fitzgerald "out-Hollywoods Hollywood" in this story.

## Suspense

### Kismine reveals the jewels she stole…

We should have a feeling that something is bound to go wrong here, mostly because Kismine has so far proven herself to be not the smartest person in the world. So we don't rest easy until she pulls the jewels out of the pocket, at which point out suspicions are confirmed. They're rhinestones instead of real jewels.

## Denouement

### The three survivors make plans to live and work in Hades.

Now that the excitement is over, John, Kismine, and Jasmine look forward to what appears to be a rather bleak future. There is no real "explanation" or "revelation" part to this denouement.

## Conclusion

### Was it just a dream?

You've got us here – the ending to "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" is just plain strange. From religious allegory to literary allusions, any number of things could be going on here. See "What's Up with the Ending?" for a full discussion, but don't expect a definitive answer.

# The Diamond as Big as the Ritz as Booker's Seven Basic Plots Analysis: Voyage and Return Plot

Christopher Booker is a scholar who wrote that every story falls into one of seven basic plot structures: Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, the Quest, Voyage and Return, Comedy, Tragedy, and Rebirth. Shmoop explores which of these structures fits this story like Cinderella’s slipper.

## Plot Type :

## Anticipation Stage and 'Fall' into the Other World

### John goes with Percy to his home in Montana.

The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" is a fantastic example of the "Voyage and Return" Booker plot – it fits the mold to a T. In fact, Booker even cites this story as a key example of this pattern. So let's get to it already. In this initial stage, John, who loves rich people, eagerly anticipates spending a summer with the very wealthy Washingtons. He is a bit of an outsider to the world of the super-wealthy because of his own origins. Sure, the Ungers are affluent, but, as the opening passages tell us, not the kind of socially elite people that John hob-nobs with at St. Midas' prep.

## Initial Fascination or Dream Stage

### John is fascinated by the Washington estate.

John is both exhilarated by and uncomfortable with the world of the Washingtons. The fact that he keeps falling asleep his first night there shows us how truly overwhelmed he is at the opulence that Percy takes for granted. It's clear that he is an outsider in this strange world; it's not a place where he could ever feel at home, certainly. Kismine is part of the appeal of this new world.

## Frustration Stage

### Braddock Washington has a dark side.

If you didn't get the hints yet, it becomes increasingly clear that there's something wrong with this picture. John gets a real glimpse of Washington's darker side when he sees the prisoners in the ground – but even this doesn't totally faze him. It's not until he hears that his *own* life is in danger that he really gets worried.

## Nightmare Stage

### Attack, near-death, bombs everywhere…

This is the stage in which the hero is seriously threatened. In John's case, he is first threatened by Braddock's own men – he discovers them in the hall and is certain that they were on their way to kill him. Then, he is threatened by the air-strike pioneered by Braddock's escaped prisoners. Will John make it out alive?

## Thrilling Escape and Return

### John makes a thrilling escape to the woods; he plans his return to Hades.

John's escape was not just a literal escape from the doomed *château*, but also from the world of wealth he entered at the start of the story. Notice that he plans a return to Hades, not to St. Midas' prep – meaning that the school and the Washington estate were part of the same foreign world. In his description of the seven basic plots, Booker says that a fundamental question arises at the end of the "Voyage and Return": have the main characters been fundamentally changed, or was it all "just a dream"? John and his companions actually consider this very question at the conclusion – see "What's Up with the Ending?" for more on this note.

# Three-Act Plot Analysis

For a three-act plot analysis, put on your screenwriter’s hat. Moviemakers know the formula well: at the end of Act One, the main character is drawn in completely to a conflict. During Act Two, she is farthest away from her goals. At the end of Act Three, the story is resolved.

## Act I

John leaves his home for St. Midas' prep. He meets Percy and then travels with him to his home in Montana.

## Act II

John spends the summer with the Washingtons. He falls in love with Kismine and then discovers that he is to be killed. He wakes in the middle of the night and finds men in the hallway outside his door.

## Act III

The *château* is under an air strike. John escapes to the woods with Kismine and her sister, watches it all go up in flames, and then plans for his future.

**The Diamond as Big as the Ritz Trivia**

Brain Snacks: Tasty Tidbits of Knowledge

Jimmy Buffet wrote a song called "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz." [Take one look at these lyrics](http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/Diamond-as-Big-as-the-Ritz-lyrics-Jimmy-Buffett/D04F324B9F017D0C482569A1000FA274) and realize that he totally would have gotten an "A" in AP English. He nails this one.

We can see the influence of Fitzgerald's trip to Montana not only in "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz," but also in [*The Great Gatsby*](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/literature/f-scott-fitzgerald/the-great-gatsby.html). Gatsby's benefactor, Dan Cody, is described as "a product of the Nevada silver fields, of every rush for metal since seventy-five," a man made "many times a millionaire" by "the transactions in Montana copper."

Fitzgerald was paid only $300 for "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" in 1922, the equivalent of about $3,800 today. Compare this to another of his famous stories, "Babylon Revisited," for which he received $4,000 in 1931 – the equivalent of over $50,000 today. ([Source](http://www.sc.edu/fitzgerald/diamond/index.html))

F. Scott Fitzgerald was a big fan of American author Edith Wharton. When she invited him over to tea, he got drunk and told inappropriate, licentious stories. Wharton wrote in her diary that it was "awful." ([Source](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4158/is_19951209/ai_n14022830))

# The Diamond as Big as the Ritz Allusions & Cultural References

When authors refer to other great works, people, and events, it’s usually not accidental. Put on your super-sleuth hat and figure out why.

## Religious and Mythological References

* [Hades](http://www.pantheon.org/articles/h/hades.html) (the name of John's hometown): Hades was the Greek God of the Underworld; the Underworld itself can also be referred to as "Hades."
* [Midas](http://www.pantheon.org/articles/m/midas.html) (the name of John's prep school): King Midas was a mythological Greek figure who turned all that he touched into gold – eventually to his own detriment.
* [The Twelve Disciples](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/history/disciples_1.shtml) (the "men of Fish"): This is an indirect allusion to the Twelve Disciples of Jesus in the New Testament.
* [El Dorado](http://www.pantheon.org/articles/e/el_dorado.html) (6.24): The Washington estate is compared to this hidden, mythological city of great wealth.

## Literary References

* Dante Alighieri,, [*The Inferno*](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/literature/dante-alighieri/inferno.html) (1.8): This one is an indirect allusion. John's father muses on the "old-fashioned Victorian motto" that stands "over the gates of the town." He finds it to be "a little depressing." This alludes to the inscription which, in Dante's *Inferno*, stands over the gates of Hell: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."
* William Shakespeare, [*A Midsummer Night's Dream*](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/literature/william-shakespeare/a-midsummer-night-s-dream.html) (2.30): Jasmine initially appears to John as a sort of [Titania](http://www.shmoop.com/character/literature/william-shakespeare/a-midsummer-night-s-dream/titania.html), referencing the character in Shakespeare's play (FYI: Titania was the fairy queen).
* Aeschylus, [*Prometheus Bound*](http://books.google.com/books?id=bWUWAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=Prometheus+Bound&client=firefox-a) (10.13): Braddock is described as "Prometheus Enriched" as a twist on the title of this Ancient Greek play.
* Voltaire, [*Candide*](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/literature/voltaire/candide.html) (Watch us argue in "What's Up with the Ending?" that Fitzgerald alludes to Candide's great satire. Of course, we could be wrong.)

**The Diamond as Big as the Ritz Questions**

Bring on the tough stuff - there’s not just one right answer.

1. Does "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" function primarily as social satire or as a fantasy story?
2. What do you make of the original title of this story – "The Diamond in the Sky"? If you were to write a Shmoop-style "What's Up with the Title?" for this original, what would you talk about? Why do you think Fitzgerald changed it to "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz"? Which title is better?
3. How does John's character change throughout the course of the story? What does he learn?
4. Is there a morale to this story? If so, what is it? Is there any moral ambiguity in the text, or is it all cut-and-dried?
5. "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" is a scathing critique of American values, but it's also pretty funny stuff. How is it that Fitzgerald uses humor to criticize?
6. "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" is stuffed full of allusions to mythology, literature, religious texts, and ancient history (see "Shout Outs" for a full list). What is the point of all this shouting out? What does it do for the story's tone, style, and themes?
7. What is the (thematic, moral, other) importance of the conversation between Braddock and his prisoners at the center of the story?