

Heaven on earth:
religious allusions in
"the diamond as big
as the ritz"



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In “ The Diamond as Big as the Ritz”, Fitzgerald illustrates a metaphorical Heaven and Hell through the Washington estate and birthplace of John T. Unger. The ambiguous nature of these two important biblical concepts is distorted, yet apparent throughout the short story. The idea of inclusivity and exclusivity mirrors Fitzgerald’s description of the metaphorical Heaven and Hell in “ Diamond as Big as the Ritz”. In contrast with the Bible, the Washington estate is highly exclusive while John’s hometown, Hades, is inclusive. The ambiguous nature of Fitzgerald’s metaphor provides an antithesis to well-known Christian concepts and how they might appear on Earth.

John T. Unger is from a small town in Mississippi named Hades. His parents send him away to the “ most expensive” and “ most exclusive” preparatory school in the world, St. Midas (183). Upon departure, John’s father ensures John that he will “ keep the home fires burning” in his absence (183). The allusion to a biblical Hades is made stark by this line. Hades, or Hell, is akin to the underworld and is where all of the unbelievers go when they die. However, John and his family are alive and live in the earthly Hades. Though John comes from the underworld and is consequently used to being under heat, he disembarks to attend St. Midas. The school name is another allusion to a god who turned anything that he touched to gold. The idea of the most exclusive and expensive school closely aligns with this background. Those who attend are turned into gold. They graduate and receive an education that is the best and therefore, the graduates are the version of gold in society.

Nearing the end of the school year, John becomes friends with a “ quiet, handsome” and “ well dressed” boy who seemed “ aloof from the other boys” at school (184). Percy Washington invites John to spend the summer at his home “ in the West” and John accepts (184). Upon arrival in Montana, the boys stop at the “ village of Fish” where there are “ twelve men...gathered like ghosts” who are all “ beyond religion” (185). These men are described as a “ congregation who lifted up a prayer of dim, anaemic wonder” (185). To John, this sight is inhumane and confusing. These twelve men allude to the twelve disciples in the Bible who follow Jesus. However, there is one big difference. Whereas Jesus’s disciples follow and worship him while including others and accepting followers with open arms, these twelve men seem mysterious and scary. They seem to have no purpose in life and foreshadow later events in the short story.

Approximately 30 minutes later, a luxurious car arrives to pick up Percy and John. Percy apologizes to John for the long buggy ride saying that “ it wouldn’t do for the people...in Fish to see this automobile” (186). This line provides insight into Percy’s worldview. He views himself above all others and deems the people of Fish below him and therefore, they are excluded from his world and possessions. After a scary car ride involving being dangled between cliffs and navigating the mountain, the boys arrive on the grounds of the Washington estate located on “ the only five square miles of land in the country that’s never been surveyed” (187). This information prompts a conversation which reveals the “ one thing in the world” which frightens Mr. Washington: “ Aeroplanes” (188).

Finally, the boys enter the estate and Percy introduces John as “ my friend... from Hades” (189). This distinction is important because the Washington family resides on a mountain, totally excluded from the outside world. In contrast, John is from the depths of the south where a “ welcome sign” greets all who enter (183). John continues the narrative by describing the heavenly features of the estate. Its beauty “ dazzled the eyes with a whiteness that could be compared only with itself, beyond human wish or dream” (189). Everything is pure and beyond all imagination, alluding to Heaven in the Bible. Though everything seems perfect, John becomes quite disoriented and tired. He falls asleep right after Percy mentions that the entire mountain that the chateau rests on is “ solid diamond” (190).

Apparently, the Washingtons discovered the mountain generations ago and made a fortune selling small parts of the mountain to men all over the world. Percy’s father ended the business after converting some diamond into radium and then “[sealing] up the mine” (194). To protect the wealth, Percy and his family must protect the secret to avoid the mountain’s discovery and send “ the world to utter poverty” (195). This is ironic because the Washingtons have no knowledge about poverty and obviously have no care about anyone but themselves. They refuse to be discovered and exclude everyone from their wealth. Mr. Washington is so exclusive that he sealed up his own diamond mine so that no one else could profit from its hold. After this story, John goes for a stroll and meets Kismine, Percy’s sister who is described in angelic imagery as “ the incarnation of physical perfection” (196). In the Bible, Jesus is God made into man and consequently, the

incarnation of perfection. Kismine, like Christ, is not prideful. She claims to be “innocent” and strives to live “in a wholesome way” (197).

One day, Mr. Washington brings John to “El Dorado”, a “cavity in the earth” where he keeps his prisoners. One of the prisoners yells at Mr. Washington and says, “you’re not a humanitarian...but you’re human” in an attempt to appeal to some emotion (200). Mr. Washington coolly responds, “Cruelty doesn’t exist where self-preservation is involved” (200). His worldview is one of exclusivity as well. The Washingtons, as well as their estate, begin to seem less heavenly by the day. Accordingly, John and Kismine fall in love and decide to “elope the following June” (203). In conversation, Kismine reveals that her father murders all of the children’s guests before they leave the estate. Instead of a mountain of diamond, this is a mountain of death. John becomes angry and paranoid, knowing that his death is approaching. Kismine reveals that she “can’t let such an inevitable thing as death stand in the way of enjoying life” and that she simply wants John to be happy (205). Scared for his life, John decides that he and Kismine must “depart the next night” (206).

After midnight, John is awakened by the “sharp noise” of airplanes (207). He jumps, finds Kismine and tells her to “dump the contents of [her] jewel box” into her pockets (209). John, Kismine and her sister Jasmine rest in the woods and John daydreams that the “dark and glittering right of the Washingtons would be over” (210). All of a sudden, Mr. Washington appears and offers “a bribe to God” (211). He offers God the “greatest diamond in the world” if matters would return “as they were yesterday at this hour” and that they “should so remain” (212). All of this is done “in pride” (212). Therefore, God

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"[refuses] to accept the bribe" (213). In angst, Mr. Washington grabs his remaining family and disappears into a trap door on the side of the mountain right before it exploded in "blue smoke" (214). After the explosion, "there was no fire" and there was no sound (214). As foreshadowed, Mr. Washington's single fear emerges and results in not only his destruction, but his family's. His selfishness, exclusivity and pride created his fortune, yet ultimately brought death. Mr. Washington believed that he was equal to God because of his earthly Heaven. His downfall reinstates the theme that humans cannot be God and that no one is the master of his or her fate.

After the estate is destroyed, John discovers that Kismine took the wrong jewels and that they are poor. The girls will have to go to Hades. Kismine remarks, "what a dream it was", referring to her childhood (216). John responds, "It was a dream" (216). He continues saying, "there are only diamonds in the whole world, diamond and perhaps the shabby gift of disillusion" (216). If he could have the last diamond, he would "make the usual nothing of it" (216). John's statement simply reinforces the theme throughout the short story that gold, diamonds and all the wealth in the world ultimately amount to nothing. There is no omniscient human being on the earth and all people eventually die. Ironically, the Washingtons' 'heaven on earth' is abolished, leaving Hades as the alternative for a better life.

In "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz", Fitzgerald alludes to the biblical concepts of Heaven and Hell through his portrayal of the Washington estate and John's hometown, Hades. Though the estate is initially portrayed as 'heaven on earth', John quickly discovers that it and its residents have major flaws. The Washingtons' exclusion of others, failure to share their wealth and <https://assignbuster.com/heaven-on-earth-religious-allusions-in-the-diamond-as-big-as-the-ritz/>

prideful spirits result in their downfall. In contrast, John's inclusion of others leads him to save his love, Kismine, and her sister, Jasmine. While Mr. Washington led the remainder of his family to death, the reader speculates that John led his friends to Hades, where a life of inclusion awaited.

Work Cited

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. "Diamond as Big as the Ritz." *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. Ed. Matthew Bruccoli. New York: Scribner, 1989.