

ANALYSIS

“The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” (1922)

F. Scott Fitzgerald

(1896-1940)

John T. Unger, a teenager from Hades, Mississippi, becomes a friend of Percy Washington at their Massachusetts preparatory school and goes to spend the summer holiday at the Washington mansion in the wilds of Montana. It is located on isolated land that conceals a diamond mine and a single gem one cubic mile in extent, discovered by Percy’s grandfather and concealed from the world. The summer ends when the diamond mountain is located from planes by aviators who land to scale its great peak. With his father and mother Percy disappears into the mine but the mountain disintegrates, burying them and the aviators, while John and Percy’s two sisters contemplate the scene of the disaster.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 200

“‘The Diamond as Big as the Ritz’ is a whimsical allegory (Fitzgerald calls it a fantasy) of the American monied classes. The hero, John Unger, comes from a small town called Hades to go to a fashionable prep school in the east. There he meets the effete Percy Washington, who confesses to him that his father is ‘by far the richest man in the world.’ On a summer vacation Percy takes John home to his western estate; it turns out to be a fantastic Montana castle, protected with anti-aircraft guns and built on a mountain which is one solid diamond. John falls in love with Percy’s sister Kismine, but their romance is interrupted by a furious aerial attack; Percy’s father Braddock Washington tries futilely to bribe God by offering him the diamond, but the chateau is destroyed.

As the story ends Kismine and John flee from ‘heaven’ to Hades, concluding that ‘there are only diamonds in the whole world, diamonds and perhaps the shabby gift of disillusion.’ This early story contains one of Fitzgerald’s infrequent comments on social injustice; the political content, however, is oblique and satirical, found mainly in remarks of the type which Kismine makes when fifty thousand dollars’ worth of her father’s slaves are killed in the air raid: “So few Americans,’ she complains, ‘have any respect for property’.”

Donald Heiney

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(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 145-46

Michael Hollister (2015)