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Becoming Your Broken Cisterns: F. Scott Fitzgerald's Short-Fiction Treatment of Religion

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May, 2018

To the Dean of the Graduate School:

We are submitting a thesis written by Richard W. Halkyard entitled “Becoming Your Broken Cisterns: F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Short-Fiction Treatment of Religion.”

We recommend acceptance in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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“Becoming Your Broken Cisterns: F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Short-Fiction Treatment of
Religion”

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty

Of the

College of Arts and Sciences

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the

Requirements for the Degree

Of

Master of Arts

In English

Winthrop University

May, 2018

By

Richard W. Halkyard

Abstract

The intention of my thesis is to reorient the popular vantage points whereby the masses view — and pigeonhole — author F. Scott Fitzgerald. Literary critics and cursory readers alike oftentimes fail to see how the writer's foundational Catholic upbringing, and therefore, a religious inclination informed his craft. While Fitzgerald was raised Catholic, few literary critics acknowledge the pattern of religious thematics and imagery Fitzgerald implemented throughout the course of his career. Among those select critics — including Joan Allen, Alice Hall Petry, and Edward Gillin — none argue for a positive relationship between Fitzgerald and the Christian God.

I assert that Fitzgerald exhibited a desire for God, and the short-fiction story form is the clearest evidence for such a claim. While Fitzgerald produced only four novels during his lifetime, he published well over 150 short stories. Brevity, commercial anonymity, and attention to concurrent novel releases provided Fitzgerald the opportunity to express his religious views via short fiction. I examine four of Fitzgerald's short works, "Benediction" (1920), "One of My Oldest Friends" (1925), "Absolution" (1926), and "Thank You for the Light" (1936), paying particular attention to the apparent desires — what I call *cisterns* — of each tale. Examining these cisterns as they act upon a character's religious beliefs or position, while employing Freudian theory of defense

mechanisms, I illustrate how — for Fitzgerald — human craving usually overwhelms the need or benefit for religion.

Although the character's reaction usually yields a denial of God, each subsequent piece suggest a different tone of rejection from Fitzgerald. His subtle shift of rejection towards religious acquiescence suggests he used fiction to process both his religious and existential beliefs. Moreover, as I demonstrate with "Thank You for the Light," when Fitzgerald spiraled into addiction, his characters not only follow their cisterns to greater detriment but also begin to acquiesce God in turn.

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Chapter 1 *Drinking From Cisterns While Hoping Beyond Hope*

Held captive by the glitzy sheen of Jazz-Age luxury and, subsequently, an emphasis of class distinction, critics overlook the religious ethos of F. Scott Fitzgerald. By in large, scholars agree that Fitzgerald drew solely from the wells of wealth, women, class, and love for his works. While such reservoirs of inspiration are undeniably present, one such muse continues to go terribly underappreciated. Proper interpretations for a select group of the author's fiction, therefore, suffer. No matter whether his life circumstance positioned him to curse the God of his youth or thank Him, Fitzgerald's fiction — particularly his short-fiction — is saturated with a sincere, religious spirit. Moreover, I argue his overtly religious short-fiction provides a glimpse into his evolving agnosticism. From 1920 to 1937, Fitzgerald transforms from an angry backslider to the ambivalent wanderer. With his final tale, he all but settles in the dismal harbor of despair, hoping beyond hope.

I intend, with the analysis below, to construct a case for such a religious inclination in Fitzgerald's shorter works. In these compacted stories, I assert Fitzgerald spoke more adeptly and with greater sincerity on his view of religion. Indeed, Fitzgerald scholar Alice Hall Petry concurs in her book, *Fitzgerald's Craft of Short Fiction*, insofar as maintaining Fitzgerald as a deft craftsman of short fiction. Petry writes, "Fitzgerald himself from the very beginning of his career

took great pride in his work as a writer of short fiction” (1). Because short fiction inherently places a high premium on space — and therefore, meaning — Fitzgerald’s plot lines afforded him not a single wasted word. Furthermore, as his personal correspondence indicates, the material for his short stories often originated from the earlier drafts of a novel. Fitzgerald published his novels with the dual aim of gaining the widest audience as well as commercial success. Yet, writing about religion no longer appealed to the youthful, American audience. Notwithstanding, Fitzgerald insisted on the inclusion of his religious ideas as he punctuated every major novel with a short story dealing with the matters of God. From this rationale, I posit that his short stories contain the *most accurate* Rosetta Stone to Fitzgerald’s own religious identity. By so doing, I magnify not only a biographical impetus towards religion but also measure religion’s presence by exploring the psyches of his characters. To this end, I examine Fitzgerald’s short stories “Benediction” (1920), “Absolution” (1926), “One of My Oldest Friends” (1926), and the posthumously published “Thank You for the Light” (1936). The aforementioned pieces were carefully selected on the grounds of continuity and overt inclusion of religious.

Regarding continuity, the four short stories demonstrate a wide scope of time. Evidenced by the year of each story’s publication, my examination covers the beginning of Fitzgerald’s career with “Benediction” in 1920, the ascension to his highest popularity with “Absolution” and “One of My Oldest Friends” in

1925, and his gradual decline into addiction and obscurity by 1936 with “Thank You for the Light.” In addition, these stories signify a chronological continuity. An exploration of Fitzgerald’s use of religion in sequential order illustrates a sequential evolution of his religious disposition. Further still, providing a career-long investigation of one craft element as opposed to a season of writing shows consistency *and* persistence with that element. Fitzgerald’s short story pieces above deal most directly with the spiritual — or religious — element(s). Every one of these tales involves a particular religious setting, like a cathedral, and each storyline tracks an identity crisis of some sort, all arising from a character’s deeply embedded desire. Either prohibited from, indulged in, or even a combination of both, these desires effectively act upon the character’s religious attitude. For the sake of identifying these desires in relation to religion, I use the biblical concept of *cisterns* — more precisely, *broken cisterns*. Prior to discussing Fitzgerald’s faith — or by proxy — that of his characters, I must first explain the nature of broken cisterns. In so doing, I intend also to establish the credibility of cisterns as an assessment for spiritual health.

Despite its maintained tradition, the word *cistern* does not appear often in modern lexicons explicitly, but rather implicitly. According to James Strong’s *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, the Hebrew translation of this word refers to a tool not so far removed from common, contemporary use. Through manual labor, Israelites constructed (or *hewed*) unrefined holes for water retention and

drinking purposes. Modern Americans know cisterns as the kindred *well* or *waterhole*. Using a Hebrew primitive root verb, *ba'ar* (to dig; by analogy, engrave), God unveils that His people bore metaphorical holes into their hearts to hold metaphorical water. Consequently, the act of gathering self-construed cisterns is not an action, but a systemic practice of human identity. Put another way, God judges not by what Israel *did*, but rather by who they *are*. A cistern, *self-made*, is a projection and extension of self; from the heart a cistern is born and therein attempts to retain worldly satisfaction — apart from God — to sustain itself. For this reason, one cannot divorce cistern from self or self without God.

The Book of Jeremiah provides a crystalline picture of the cistern as it relates to the connection between God and His people. Jeremiah the Judean prophet, receives an oracle, or burden, from God centering on His indictment of Israel's infidelity. God declared to Jeremiah His people guilty of sin — or any lack of conformity unto God's law. (*English Standard Version*, Lev. 5.17).

Enlisting Jeremiah to proclaim His verdict, God rebukes Israel, stating,

Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out

cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.

(English Standard Version, Jer. 2.11-13, italics added)

While the Bible contains passages shrouded in mystery, God delivers a fairly clear narrative here. Israel committed two sins: forsaking a covenant relationship with God and, subsequently, engraving cisterns in His place. Therefore, God's ancient discrepancy dictates an actively apostatical human heart seeking fulfillment through any earthly means. Simple behavior modification cannot rectify the problem because the problem *is* the human heart. Although these desires are benevolent, in and of themselves, they are often pursued at the expense of one's self. In other words, if one's cistern is peace and the way one pursues peace is an abusive intake of alcohol, it can be to one's own detriment or that of others. More importantly, these fiercely held desires oftentimes consume one's self at the expense of a religious relationship with God.

American literature is no stranger to protagonists transfixed on a singular desire. In point of fact, Harvard scholar Sacvan Bercovitch considers the attribute part of an American archetype — one that he labels the “American Jeremiad” — of plot and character development. Indeed, Fitzgerald's incorruptible dreamer, Jay Gatsby — or the penniless James Gatz — embodies such an archetype, perilously consumed and driven by desire. Bercovitch writes in *The American Jeremiad* that American writers “see themselves as outcasts, prophets crying in the wilderness... *American* Jeremiahs [are] simultaneously lamenting a declension and celebrating

a national dream” (180). He likens this national dream to the latter-day Puritan covenant to God, not as literal comparison but a symbolic one. Just as Puritans submitted themselves to the word of God and their local church, 19th and 20th-Century Americans “offer *themselves* as the symbol incarnate” of the American dream and mythos (180).

In Bercovitch’s introduction, “The Puritan Errand Reassessed,” he establishes the criteria for the American jeremiad. “Errand” — or one’s “culture [as] faith in process” — included any ritual, including literature, which “made its anxiety its end as well as its means... [and] fed on the distance between promise and fact” (23). Angry dissatisfaction slowly clouds vision and cripples rationale, yet remains the only course of action in the minds of grand dreamers and idealists. The ineffable love of Daisy Buchanan is both Gatsby’s identity and compass. Bercovitch stipulates the errand of American jeremiads operated in tandem with “direction and purpose” (24). He clarifies *direction* and *purpose* as essential in “sustain[ing] process by imposing control, and to justify control by presenting a certain form of process as the only road to the future kingdom” (24). What is the cool, West-Egg millionaire if not an American jeremiad archetype? Gatsby exploits his lavish riches gained from quasi-unlawful business to realize *self* in Daisy.

Indeed, Gatsby anxiously groped for the green light on Daisy’s bay and all the promise contained therein. Yet, despite five years of obsessive calculation,

Gatsby fulfills not his “yearn[ing] to repair the breach” (Stephenson 3) between the poor James Gatz and the “Platonic conception of himself” (Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 104). The conduit lay in reviving an amputated romance, carving Gatsby’s identity into an empty hole — or cistern — longing to be filled. Instead his identity — wholly dependent upon a satisfying “cisternal” oneness with Daisy Buchanan — implodes altogether with a pistol shot. Though Jay Gatsby succumbed to a bullet in 1922, his death began in childhood with the despair of his real *self*. His despair metastasized in 1917 with the arrival of Daisy Buchanan. Both events cultivated a presumptuous omnipotence and sovereign, God-like control over time itself. Indeed, Gatsby inherently forsakes all to drink from the ever-draining cistern of earthly love and success.

A working knowledge of cisternal desire, one’s consequential guilt, and its implications enables readers to diagnose the religious tumult of Fitzgerald’s characters. Such a diagnosis begins by drawing out Fitzgerald’s biographical Catholic inclination. In *Candles and Carnival Lights: The Catholic Sensibility of F. Scott Fitzgerald* — perhaps the most comprehensive study of Fitzgerald and religion to date — author Joan Allen evidences the centrality of Fitzgerald’s lapsed Catholicism. She cites a particular interview he gave in 1928, near the height of his literary fame. When asked about the pivotal influences of his childhood, the author declared the Roman Catholic Church as a primary sculptor (Allen 60). His words imply that his bond with the Catholicism went beyond that

of orthodoxy, rote liturgy, and inculcated memorization of antiquated homilies. Because the interview occurred at the apex of his authorial minimum — at this point in his career, Fitzgerald’s price for short fiction rose to a whopping \$4,000 (Bruccoli, *The Price Was High* 278) — one cannot pigeonhole the statement as bygone regret or a nostalgic sentiment. With a reputation to uphold and bills outstanding, Fitzgerald refrained from falsely pandering to an institution like the Catholic Church. Undoubtedly, the young writer could not afford that kind of practice. No, I argue Fitzgerald’s sentiment identifies writing as his only conceivable religious outlet. The 1928 interview would come as no surprise to Irving Malin — author of “‘Absolution’: Absolving Lies” — who states not only that Fitzgerald “believes in orthodox religion..., [but] that he [could] never completely remove himself from the Catholicism of his youth” (209).

Baptized in the Cathedral of St. Paul in 1896 Minnesota, Fitzgerald began a catechizing education under the likes of awe-striking Reverend Michael Fallon and, more notably, Father Monsignor Cyril Sigourney Fay (Allen 4,7). Enrolled at the New Jersey Newman School in 1911, a year after his rite of First Communion, Fitzgerald experienced a brief, but potent rebirth of zeal for the Catholic faith. Allen explains the indelible tutelage of Father Fay, and its impression upon the young writer. She quotes Fitzgerald fondly remembering that “[Fay] made of that Church a dazzling, golden thing, dispelling its oppressive mugginess and giving the succession of days upon gray days, passing under its plaintive ritual, the

romantic glamour of an adolescent dream” (37). Aware of the various *oppressive* perceptions the Catholic church had earned — which he later, personally held — Fitzgerald nevertheless enjoyed a revival of seriousness towards his Catholic roots while at Newman between 1912 and 1915. Yet, in the aforementioned quotation, the older Fitzgerald recalls his reawakening to all matters spiritual with notions of romanticism and gilded bedazzlement. Furthermore, the young author refers to the reinvigoration of his Catholicism to that of an *adolescent* dream.

These qualifiers only grant a sense of brief devotion to religion — largely through either his clerical heroes or emotional illuminations. For Fitzgerald, the radiance of the church appears to be as ephemeral as Jay Gatsby’s summer carnival parties. The rise of his infatuation, astronomical in its own right, grew into a conviction of study as he excelled in the Newman courses of Christian orthodoxy while nearly failing English (Allen 32). But, just as the blossoming of this self-proclaimed *romance* came to a fully-fledged Spring, the adventure he thirsted for came from his beloved Father Fay. In 1917, Allen continues, the spiritual father to Fitzgerald invited the young man to Rome to carry out a surreptitious act of diplomacy with the Pope himself. Logistically, the plan proved conflicting for the youthful, but spiritually struggling Fitzgerald, and he did not go on the trip. Though it is unclear whether financial circumstance, fear, or lack of volition hindered Fitzgerald, this lost opportunity to serve Fay causes a noticeable severance from any semblance of a practicing Catholic (Allen 30).

Despite Fitzgerald's religious disenfranchisement dating back to 1917, one school of thought finds his Catholic disinterest crystallized in wedding Georgian debutante Zelda Sayre in 1920 due to his overwhelming ardor for her. In a sense, the passion that Zelda evoked from the young Fitzgerald and her love in turn, filled his proverbial cup. In other words, what Fay defined as a gift *from God*, Fitzgerald seemingly deemed Zelda *as God*. Winning the affections of women — as his thematic metanarrative demonstrates — determined a man's arrival in life. Arrival, then, places the agency of women in the hearts of men, above God. However, just prior to their wedding, Fitzgerald's life grew in complexity.

In less than one year, Fitzgerald released *Flappers and Philosophers*' short story "Benediction" and published *This Side of Paradise* — the all-but-pending stipulation of Zelda's marriage consent. As only one week separated the latter two events, marrying Zelda became preeminent. So much so that — on his own accord — Fitzgerald and his bride-to-be traded vows before a New York Catholic priest right after her arrival. Once more, an important demarcation of Fitzgerald's life (i.e., covenanting to Zelda and his newly published novel) conveys a voluntary homage to faith. Fitzgerald's choice to wed in such a way evidences what I assert: Fitzgerald never truly divorced himself from religion. Yet, his newly wedded wife Zelda, and their meteoric rise to fame on the wings of *This Side of Paradise* supplied earthly satisfaction of the likes Fitzgerald had never enjoyed before. Riches spiraled to debt and debt catalyzed an addictive dependency on

alcohol. Each degree of Fitzgerald's earthly fame seemed to bring him only greater spiritual separation.

Below, I outline these degrees of religious separation using Fitzgerald's short stories "Benediction," "One of My Oldest Friends," "Absolution," and "Thank You for the Light." In tandem with these shorter pieces, I also support my position with supplemental excerpts from his novels (*This Side of Paradise*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Tender Is the Night*). While the argument focuses mainly on short fiction, I believe his novels provide a helpful context, concurrent material to his short works in debate, and to illustrate that Fitzgerald's mention of religion not only appears throughout his career, but also across structural forms of craft. I begin with Fitzgerald's 1920 piece, anthologized in *Flappers and Philosophers*, "Benediction."

While *This Side of Paradise* attracted international attention to Fitzgerald, the novel paved the way for its successor, "Benediction." This shorter piece peers into the metaphorical division between desires of the religious and the secular worlds. Originally entitled "The Ordeal," the supernatural yarn shadows nineteen-year-old Lois as she mulls over the prospect of absconding to rejoin her previous lover, Howard. Unmistakably, the young woman is torn over the decision, because — as Howard's letter at the opening of the piece implies — the security of their relationship is uncertain at best. Yet, her lover's correspondence also indicates that the couple shares an emotional, physical passion too good to end. Determined

towards such a passion, however, Lois seeks the company and advice of her estranged brother, would-be Jesuit Priest Kieth. Brother and sister spend the afternoon, visiting with one another and making up for lost time. The comforting love Kieth extends to such an unfamiliar, but blood relation both affirms Lois' resistance to conservatism and compounds the tension between her and religion. While there, she attends a benediction service in the nearby chapel with Kieth and his Jesuit peers. Amid a spectacular, yet frightening vision where an altar candle seems to take on life, she faints under the overwhelming force of what she perceives as the voice of God from the window of St. Francis Xavier.

Internally disputing the holy revelation that befalls her in the cathedral, Lois ultimately opts for a faithless resignation returning to the only path she wills to know. She denies the entire spiritual affair in favor of an earthly one with Howard. At the tale's conclusion, a teary-eyed Lois leaves Kieth — never truly having explained her predicament — regretting that his sweetness does not exist in a lover or anywhere else. So, for lack of a better notion, she hurdles headlong, once more, to Howard. I argue that Lois' decision is driven by a single motivating thirst. She desires, above all things, to drink from the cistern of *pleasure*: an intangibly mystical conception of *intimacy*. Likewise, I assert that Lois mirrors Fitzgerald's religious stance as of 1920. With the sweet memories of Newman and Father Fay just behind him and the wild pleasures made accessible by fame before him, religion — in a word — *fails*. Alice Hall Petry agrees insofar as religion's

incapability of helping Lois through her personal strife. Yet, the onus of her descent from grace, Petry says, falls on the ineffectual shoulders of her brother and priest, Kieth. In so doing, Petry largely absolves Lois' hunger for pleasure from any responsibility in dismissing God (36-37). I purport such a cisternal thirst is the *sole* motivation that ultimately drives the young woman into Howard's embrace.

In like fashion, "Absolution" and "One of My Oldest Friends" — a pair of Fitzgerald short stories published in 1926 — magnify instances of conjured cisterns and the dismissal of God. Comparatively, however, the tales elicit a dual representation of religion just months apart from one another. While virtually no scholarship exists on "One of My Oldest Friends," save for a few bibliographic mentions, "Absolution" has been written upon extensively. Similarly to "Benediction," Fitzgerald's "Absolution" explores the crippling spiritual and existential pain of twelve-year-old Rudolph Miller. On the cusp of his teenage years, Rudolph finds himself torn between two colorful extremities: his priest, Father Adolphus Schwartz, and his own father, Carl Miller. In legalistic anger, Carl Miller sends his son to speak with local priest Father Schwartz. Shortly after beginning his confession, Rudolph shares with Father Schwartz his lesser sins of skipping weekly Confession and disobeying his parents. However, amid his divulgence of secrets, Rudolph remembers his greater sins: deceit in Confession and the denial of his parents. All the while, Rudolph possesses an even darker

secret. Readers learn partway through the tale that Rudolph's escape from spiritual dread is the conception of the debonair *Blatchford Sarnemington*— a split identity. The young boy's schizophrenic conception of self, I argue, comes not only from a poor experience of religion of physical abuse, but also from a cisternal desire for *power*. Many critics however, including Irving Malin and Joan Allen, overlook young Rudolph's apostatical alter-ego in Blatchford Sarnemington. His pseudo-identity of covetousness, a willfully constructed false-self, exists as a bastion of safety *from* God.

Yet, for all Rudolph's honesty towards Father Schwartz, the priest suffers his own identity crisis as he attempts to assume the role Rudolph's spiritual guide. He, like Rudolph, yearns for something attractive laying beyond the grips of Midwest boredom and a subtextual struggle with sexual immorality. Therefore, Father Schwartz likely celebrated such an ambitious figure like Blatchford. Akin to Father Schwartz, who crumbles under a religious malaise, the elder Carl crumbles himself. However, Carl's demise originates from a legalistic, white-knuckled approach to God's rules and his own potentials. Both paternal figures — much like Fitzgerald's own father — proved to be lukewarm men at best, neither possessing the bold impertinence to shed the shackles of a holy façade nor finding the humility to act in tender love.

The two male characters of "One of My Oldest Friends," however, exhibit a far more positive — albeit rocky — relationship. Fitzgerald's story follows

Michael and his miraculous rescue of a bereft old friend named Charley. After the reemergence of long-lost friend Charley into Michael's life, readers learn of Charley's true nature as a deceiver and womanizer. Unfortunately, Michael learns this news from his wife, upon whom Charley had once made a sexual advance. In his hurt and damaged pride, Michael later refuses to help his old friend, now unraveling and without other options. Woeful, Charley leaves to an undisclosed location. Stricken by a mixture of grief and conviction, Michael ventures after him. Moved by intuition and a mysterious presence, Michael tracks his one-time confidant to a rail station. Desperate, Michael's attention draws toward a magnetically curious light pole appearing like a crucifix. Without any other cause, Michael runs toward the proverbial cross and thus to the direct location of Charley. At the last moment, Michael saves Charley from an oncoming train. Once recovered, Michael realizes — upon second glance — that no cross-shaped pole exists.

Whereas little internal growth exists in the deeply troubled men of "Absolution," Michael and Charley emulate change in character. Moreover, we find an optimistic implementation of religious imagery from Fitzgerald. While "Absolution" personifies God as a brooding judge standing at the ready to smite evildoers, "One of My Oldest Friends" appears to esteem God's ability to provide both power and deliverance. Particularly, it is the compelling force emitted by the crucifix-like pole that moves Michael beyond himself to deliver Charley.

Additionally, the mysterious presence of an invisible guide brings Michael into view of the crucifix-shaped pole. Religion or God, according to Fitzgerald's short story, *wins* over Charley's life as well as Michael's cisternal possession of *pride*. My third chapter discusses both of these works in greater detail while incorporating *Gatsby's* God-like figure, Dr. T.J. Eckleburg. Tom Burnham's 1952 essay "The Eyes of Dr. Eckleburg: A Re-Examination of *The Great Gatsby*" posits that the ominous, allegorical figure's inclusion exists for prosaic order. I, on the other hand, assign Dr. Eckleburg's presence as Fitzgerald's need for a religious absolute. As I explain in my third chapter, though 1925-1926 were Fitzgerald's literary golden years, a metaphorical furnace blazed underneath the writer in the forms of debt, increasing demand, and a tumultuous marriage. Therefore, I contend that such a season of fiery trial placed pressure on a spiritually confused Fitzgerald whereby his natural reaction was a reversion to the religion of his youth.

Interestingly, my argument supports the notion that the further Fitzgerald unraveled into alcoholism and eventual death, the more he seemingly reached towards his religious beginnings. The fourth chapter explores Fitzgerald's intriguing "Thank You for the Light" in light of his concurrent addiction to alcohol and extramarital affair with secretary Laura Guthrie. This fourth piece owns a unique place in his canon, published for the first time in *The New Yorker* just under six years ago in early August of 2012. The author composed "Thank

You for the Light” in 1936, and it remained an uncollected story until Fitzgerald’s grandchildren — with the help of Fitzgerald scholar James L. West III — fought to publish the story in *The New Yorker* of all places. Five years later, editor Anne Margaret Daniel compiled a slew of his more obscure works in 2017. With the help of Fitzgerald’s publisher, *Scribner*, Daniel gathered two additional uncollected works in her book *I’d Die For You: And Other Lost Stories*. Among them, “Thank You for the Light,” appeared anthologized in print form for the first time in its existence.

Only a handful of articles make any real mention of this Depression-era tale. Just four short years before Fitzgerald passed away, he wrote “Thank You for the Light” and submitted it to *The New Yorker* for publication. For Fitzgerald enthusiasts, this new addition to the writer’s catalogue remains a marvel. One particularly viable reason for this lies in its the piece’s history with *The New Yorker*. Fitzgerald’s story revolves around a woman, stripped of her natural surroundings while simultaneously taxed with the callousing career of sales. Without the comfort of friends, a spouse, or business partner, we witness his female lead — a quasi-departure from his writing formula — Mrs. Hanson as she pursues a culturally immodest, yet modest, cisternal comfort: a cigarette. Due to end of “Thank You for the Light,” in which Fitzgerald implicates the occurrence of a miracle from God, *The New Yorker* received its submission with hesitancy. Anne Margaret Daniel, speculating in her introduction to the short story, notes,

“That it is *intensely* Catholic and concludes with a miracle further ensured its refusal” (*I’d Die for You* 319).

Fitzgerald’s 1,200 word-snapshot exists as a personal reaching out for God. While his female protagonist, Mrs. Hanson, seeks worldly comfort in a complexly viewed smoking habit, the mystery of her fulfillment nevertheless happens in the midst of public prayer. The author’s genius in “Thank You for the Light” is two fold. Firstly, he offers readers an invitation to offer their own interpretation of Mrs. Hanson’s fate through the tale’s closing line and by beckoning readers to consider what they believe concerning God and how far a deity’s power extends. Secondly, the aptitude with which Fitzgerald ascribes Mrs. Hanson’s delight in smoking draws readers down into the cistern of despair she lives in. For the widowed saleswoman, the cigarette provides a great deal more than merely something to occupy an empty hand or a Freudian oral fixation. For Mrs. Hanson, as Fitzgerald, describes it, smoking breathes just as she does. *Peace* is her cistern, and each cigarette forges the golden god of ease.

Despite Joan M. Allen’s complete lack of mention regarding “Thank You for the Light,” her knowledge of the short piece almost certainly existed. Four years before her publication of *Candles and Carnival Lights: The Catholic Sensibility of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, fellow Fitzgerald scholar Ruth Prigozy published a near-comprehensive article on his unpublished stories. Her excerpt on “Thank You for the Light” — entitled “A Small Miracle” — comes across as a

rebuke of the work more than anything else. Likewise, Jennifer McCabe Atkinson describes the religious imagery of “Thank You for the Light” as both “ludicrous and absurd rather than clever and humorous,” (53). Prigozy’s diagnosis for “Benediction” are no less scathing as she asserts, “At Least ‘The Ordeal’ and ‘Benediction’ have the saving graces of vital young protagonists who distract somewhat from an equally, pseudo-religious theme” (82). In what Prigozy incorrectly calls an “irremediable failure,” the short story succinctly captures the despair of American life in the 1930s as well as the familiar unrelenting, Gatsbyesque hope for a God who cares (Prigozy 82).

I close with the rationale that clearly Fitzgerald possesses a perceptible religious value. His characters are rife with existential hurt, attempting to sooth their pain with sinful cisterns. In tandem with their sufferings — running concurrently to his own — Fitzgerald also articulates the dubious relationship they have with the God who governs them. His shorter, religious fiction — “Benediction,” “Absolution,” “One of My Oldest Friends,” and “Thank You for the Light” — exults both the hostile evasiveness and bright hopes the present America finds in religion. Yet, Fitzgerald’s map of religious individuation is not devoid of fear, danger, or seasons of dryness. Indeed, short fiction provided a greater sense of anonymity to express his true thoughts about God. In the shadows of brevity, independent journals, and commercial successes, F. Scott Fitzgerald both spurned and sought for God.

Chapter 2 *Stripped, Stained, and All For Sweetness:*

Fitzgerald's "Benediction"

Uniquely set apart by a distance of mere weeks, "Benediction" and *This Side of Paradise* shine like a high-gloss photo of Fitzgerald's faith, frozen in 1920. Despite its antagonistic attitude towards God, "Benediction" garnered praise from fans and critics alike with its release on September 10th, 1920. Fitzgerald's voice — still fresh from *This Side of Paradise's* March publication — broadcasted the restlessness of Jazz-Age youth. Perhaps the structural form of "Benediction" reflects the bustling whirlwind of American anxiety. Fitzgerald's tale of a tormenting decision between lust and Lord fit in the space of two days. Further still, though the author begins in the midst of tension, the majority of the drama spans a mere two or three hours during an afternoon. Perhaps even more extraordinary, the narrative, concluding in less than 24 hours time, plots not only the trajectory of the protagonist's foreseeable future, but her eternal state as well. What Fitzgerald outlines for us is a shining, supernatural moment in the handbreadth of a life. The matter is simple, yet it takes a craftsman to present it with such succinctness as he does here. Does one disregard a deep desire when both God and conscience disagree? With the constraint of brevity, Fitzgerald artfully exhibits the explicit, but incommunicable voice of the supernatural and one's inability to either acknowledge or ignore it.

The orthodoxy elicited by title “Benediction” juxtaposes nicely with the atheistic straying of its protagonist, Lois. Moreover, the tale abounds with taboo. Fitzgerald builds “Benediction” on the relationship between brother and sister. He thickens the narrative with two layers of tension. We learn early of the first level as Lois apprehensively considers engaging in premarital sex with a man named Howard. Stretched thin between her carnal desire and a sense of morality, she mulls over a letter the mysterious beau wired to her, wondering whether or not to respond. A reply from Lois would commit her to the relationship with a man Fitzgerald reveals virtually nothing about. Ingeniously, Fitzgerald compounds her stress by introducing her Jesuit priest-to-be brother, Kieth into the narrative. Lois decides to reach out to her estranged brother — seventeen years her senior — in order to dissuade herself somehow from a life with Howard. Although she never outrightly confides in Kieth about her passionate relationship with Howard, she attempts to explain her predicament and get advice. Yet, the driving force of her life differs remarkably from Kieth’s. As a quasi-prodigal, Lois never adhered to a religious faith, while Kieth renounced all things for such a devotion. Thusly, when approaching the topic of sexual immorality or premarital desire, the two come from drastically polar directions. In just fifteen pages, Lois chooses a premarital affair with her rather inauspicious lover, Howard, over a revelatory experience with God.

Fitzgerald's implementation of taboo, external *pressures* most plainly reveals Lois' inner longings. The correspondence we find Lois clutching at the beginning of the story magnifies her cisternal thirst from the outset. The author marks the beginning of "Benediction" with the letter from Lois' beau. Howard writes:

If I could give you the things you've always been in tune with—
but I can't. Lois, we can't marry and we can't lose each other and
let all this glorious love end in nothing. Until your letter came...I'd
been thinking where I could go to forget you...[like] Italy or Spain
and dream away the pain of having lost you where the crumbling
ruins of older, mellower civilizations would mirror only the
desolation of my heart. (141)

Their relationship strikes a discordant note with the letter's first lines. One gathers Howard's note is in response to an initiating letter from Lois readers never see. Moreover, his response evokes a vague sense of relief from a season somehow bereft of solace. However, Fitzgerald clearly constructs the dynamic between the nineteen-year-old Lois and the nebulous Howard. In Lois' response to Howard's letter, Fitzgerald simultaneously magnifies her torment and resolve. Writhing between love — or perhaps lust — and the goading sense that this intimacy might be wrong, Lois crosses the Rubicon. Inwardly, Howard's RSVP rattles her very conviction. Yet, outwardly, Lois rallies a devil-may-care posture, for her response:

She had read the letter so many times that she knew it word by word, yet it still startled her...Lois took a blank and wrote her telegram. And there were no overtones to the finality of her decision. It's just destiny—she thought—it's just the way things work out in this damn world. If cowardice is all that's been holding me back there won't be any more holding back. So we'll just let things take their course, and never be sorry....And never be sorry—thought Lois—and never be sorry— (141-142)

Cowardice, at least in the opening, belongs not to Lois but rather to Howard. While readers know not what her first letter says, one deduces that Lois wants commitment. Howard, however, replies in the ambiguously negative. His reply denotes his acknowledgment that Lois had *always* wanted a covenant, or official designation of their monogamy. Furthermore, following his rejection of marriage, his words are cut off, and readers are given no clear indication as to why he will not marry Lois. In lieu of clarity, Howard offers only a dictatorial mandate that marriage is a bygone conclusion and they continue in the same limboesque love. Ultimately, Howard proposes this retainer: keep the status-quo of a non-committal, sexual relationship.

While shame belongs to Howard first and foremost, Lois' offense lay in that she remarkably chooses to indulge him. Alice Hall Petry examines Lois' inner-monologue following Howard's distasteful letter in her book *Fitzgerald's*

Craft of Short Fiction. Calling upon Lois' refrain of "never be sorry" as well as the interiority of such a mantra, Petry concludes, "...the reference to [Lois'] thought argues that she is trying to force her rational mind to act in accordance with her body" (31). Petry points to the matter of Lois' will here. Fitzgerald has Lois moving what she *knows* to what she *wants*. Her desires, which Petry classifies as bodily — and obviously sexual — move clear and logical thought to a self-indentured, relational obligation in which she is assured no future. In a sense, Lois coaxes her *self* from herself in order to establish a new one. Her overruling desire for sexual passion and love, then, begins to shape her malleable identity. Consequently, Lois' very notion of who she is — at least for the moment — roots itself into an uncertain, and perhaps dangerous endeavor.

Petry observes Lois wills herself towards the false conviction that what she is about to do is justified. She barrels forward with a curious acquittal. By mentioning "destiny," Lois assumes the binary of own will and the indeterminate purposing of otherworldly, perhaps religious, forces. For Lois, the question is no longer a matter of *why* but rather a matter of *how*. Yearning for primal intimacy, curiosity as to what has held her in check up until now vanishes. Lois places the blame squarely on her shoulders, condemning herself of "cowardice." I believe she misjudges herself here. Perhaps, there is a more-deeply fixed longing in Lois, cleft further inwards than sex or a rudderless, unpromising romp with Howard. Too little thought is given to possibilities more wholesome of Fitzgerald's day,

like a covenant marriage she originally desired. Yet, drinking water from the cistern of lust leaves her parched for more of the same. Amid her gloomy resignation, "...it's just the way things work out in this damn world," Lois naturally admits she cannot fathom a better alternative (Fitzgerald, "Benediction" 142).

Paradoxically — and sadly — the best hope her universe can provide for her is one in which she must compromise herself to realize. Closing out her remarks on Lois' plea for self-justification, Petry writes, "Further, the word 'thought' also suggests delusion: she thought she would never be sorry—but she is already" (31). By the mere need to convince oneself of pursuing a path not only internally, but through repetition raises an enormous flag of regret. Implicitly, among all her uncertainties, Lois knows there is nothing to be gained under the sun with Howard. For even the "furtive, restless excitement she felt sometimes when he talked to her [or] his dreamy sensuousness that lulled her to sleep" clearly fails to sustain the full breadth of her need for love (Fitzgerald, "Benediction" 141-142). The passion Lois speaks of appears, at best, transient. She bases her descriptors for Howard on subjective emotions that ebb and flow hour by hour. To give oneself — or in this case, fashion one's *self* — for purposes that fail to satisfy is the human condition. Considering Sigmund Freud's model of the human psyche, Lois' ego — or unconscious — suppresses not only her uncertainty of Howard in general, but also the starkly contrasting love of Kieth.

These matters as well as Lois' troubled conscience are willfully surrendered for her satisfaction of her id, namely sexual pleasure (Bressler)

Fitzgerald sets the foundation for the rest of "Benediction" with Lois' terse reply by telegram. Criticism of her decision to convene with Howard varies from reading to reading. However, Petry clearly falls into the camp that determines Lois guilty of self-compromise for pleasure arguing that "Lois has in effect decided to exchange her virtue for... a handful of [telegram] change... her Judas is herself" (31). Where Petry advocates for Lois' religious abandonment of self in her consent to Howard, Edward Gillin disagrees, pointing to Petry's analytical reading in particular as a narrow-minded proposition. In his essay "The Grace of 'Benediction,'" Gillin discourages the notion that "Lois's final decision to keep her tryst with Howard constitutes [as] her willful repudiation of conventional religious proscriptions against extramarital sex" (41). Gillin finds Petry's conclusion of Lois overly sentimental, requiring readers to view her in a sexually pure light (41-42). Although Gillin does not acquiesce the virginity of Lois, he argues that her desire is not a wholesale departure from orthodox religion. Contrarily, I assert Lois repudiates orthodox religion. Indeed, Fitzgerald later positions Lois to stand before the altar, at the precipice of religious conversion. Yet, she does not turn from God at the point of her initial invitation for sexual promiscuity. Rather, Lois' dismissal of God — and, thusly, her embodiment of

Judas — arises while visiting her monastic brother, Kieth, in the cloistered, Baltimore chapel during afternoon Mass.

Albeit more accurate than Gillin, I find Petry's argument inadequate as well. Particularly flawed is the unjust and indelible blame she attributes to Kieth for Lois' apostasy. While she pushes for Lois' ensuing impurity by adhering to what Gillin labels "a Puritan penchant for reading signs" (40), Petry blames the Church in order to establish why Lois denounces all the Church stands for. Her primary resource for doing so also is drawing upon the ineffectual nature of Kieth as reason for her denial of religion. Notwithstanding, Petry discerns the near middle-age brother and seminarian to be a potential catalyst for good. A delay of reuniting with Howard to meet with her only kin yet mentioned appears to be either an attempt of soul redirection or simply a momentary diversion from the reality of giving herself over to both pleasure and uncertainty. In perhaps Petry's sole commentary on Kieth that I find workable, she hypothesizes, "For all her seeming confidence and liberation, Lois is actually making a last ditch effort to be talked out of doing something she does not want to do...Kieth would seem to be the ideal agent of this dissuasion. He is that recognized spokesman of moral order, a priest (or soon to be one); at thirty-six, he has seventeen more years of living than she upon which to draw for guidance in a crisis; and he is after all, her own brother. (32)"

Despite his position as an idyllic complement to that of his sister, Petry still concludes Kieth as the impotent agent of her possible redemption. She writes, “What matters is that Kieth, simultaneously the embodiment of her family and her religion, is totally ineffectual in dealing with Lois’ crisis” (36). Inevitably, Petry’s diagnosis of Kieth is overly harsh and far too expectant of his ability to change people. Her position’s fatal flaw lay in limited human ability. Abdicating her earlier, Reformed proclivity towards sinfulness, she places an alarming trust in Kieth — or anyone, no matter how priestly their office — to redirect Lois’ affections from the cisterns of lust back to morality. Armed with the deceitful power of omission, Lois refrains from providing her pious brother with entire picture. In any event, Kieth’s “priestly [in]capacity” arises from his sister’s self-enabling towards desire for impious love (Petry 36).

Kieth’s inability to properly minister to his younger sister is also a place of divergence between Gillin and Petry. Moreover, in *Candles & Carnival Lights: The Catholic Sensibilities of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, Joan Allen, too, makes a case for Kieth on the grounds of his character alone. On the cusp of “completing [the Jesuit Order’s] eighteen-year preparation for ordination” into the priesthood, Kieth’s endurance and discipline in one direction nearly eclipses Lois’ entire life span (Allen 44). In addition, Kieth emulates the “ideal” candidate for holy council by way of his subservience to a holy calling. Gillin explains that even Lois cannot but praise her brother for “cooperating with the call of such divine love—which

the world easily takes as a retreat or surrender—[and which] has cost [him] man ‘fine chances’ in life” (44). Through Kieth’s warm introductions to Father Rector and fellow seminarians, the unveiling of his own worldly testimony, and his tenderness to Lois, the young woman experiences spiritual whiplash. However winsome, though, religion in the lives of these men may be, Lois yet expresses belief that religious devotion yields only missed opportunities (i.e., cisternal pleasures she fought to avoid). Joan Allen discusses this tension — one that for “all [Fitzgerald’s] life...would burden him” (44) — between godliness and worldliness. She asserts that “Kieth’s hard and strong sweetness disarms” Lois’ precocious “desirability of worldliness” (44). Yet, no matter how refreshing godliness and tender care may prove, Lois tragically turns the other cheek.

Naturally, Fitzgerald laces the climax of “Benediction” with the notes of Roman Catholic liturgy. Up until the introductory melody of “*O Salutaris Hostia*” Lois — though skeptical of the attractiveness in godly living — gives off the slightest impression of softening. Enamored with Kieth’s *sweetness*, joining in seminarian laughter, and rendered tearful by their simple kindness, Fitzgerald appears to poise Lois for a personal reconciliation. That is not to say that Fitzgerald’s secular heroine suggests life secluded in a convent; rather, she merely gives off an air of reform. Underneath the “Victorian architecture[d]...even Woodrow Wilsonian, patented, last-a-century roofing,” however, Lois encounters an intimacy altogether separate from anything enjoyed with Howard (Fitzgerald,

“Benediction” 142-143). Communion begins with pleasant aromas and the ambrosial glow of the “sun shining through the stained-glass window of St. Francis Xavier overhead and falling in warm red tracery on the cassock of the man in front of her [when] a *heavy weight* seemed to descend upon her soul” (Fitzgerald, “Benediction” 152, italics added).

Notwithstanding the chapel’s sensory delights like the warm light on stained St. Francis Xavier, only with the arrival of this mysterious “weight” did all things evolve for Lois into grotesque entities. Her first inclination is a clear, Freudian projection of her own distress. Neither Kieth nor Jarvis — Kieth’s closest colleague at the monastery — are to blame for the ensuing episode. Whether her irritation manifests in the “grat[ing]” misfires of choral falsettos or the incense chokingly envelops her, the issue springs empirically from what Fitzgerald calls the “soul” level (Fitzgerald, “Benediction” 153). Further into the text, Fitzgerald expounds on Lois’ soul tribulation. He writes:

Again she repressed a faint laugh, and then in an instant the weight upon her heart suddenly diffused into cold fear. It was that candle on the altar. It was all wrong—wrong. Why didn’t somebody see it? There was something in it. There was something coming out of it, taking form and shape above it. She...told herself it was the wick. If the wick wasn’t straight, candles did something—but they didn’t do this! With incalculable rapidity a force was gathering

within her, a tremendous, assimilative force, drawing from every sense, every corner of her brain, and as it surged up inside her she felt an enormous, terrified repulsion. She drew her arms in close to her side, away from Kieth and Jarvis. Something in that candle... she was leaning forward—in another moment she felt she would go forward toward it—didn't anyone see it?... anyone? ... Suddenly, she became aware of a new presence, something external, in front of her, consummated and expressed in warm red tracery. Then she knew. It was the window of St. Francis Xavier. Her mind gripped at it, clung to it finally... Then out of a great stillness came a voice: 'Blessed be God.' ... With the sound of a half-gasp, half-cry, she rocked on her feet and reeled backward into Kieth's outstretched arms. (153-154, Fitzgerald's italics)

I quote Fitzgerald at length in order to convey the sheer difference between Howard's effect on Lois' heart — the cistern competing for her affections — and this force, most presumably God in apparition form. Furthermore, and beyond dispute, the excerpt is the short story's climax. I cite the climax in its fulness to demonstrate that the force descending upon Lois is not simply a hallucination, but an otherworldly presence.

Firstly, we must understand that Fitzgerald equates the soul, an abstract entity, with the concrete human heart. This equivalence is vital in comprehending

that — as established earlier by Jeremiah’s prophecy — both cisternal guilt and one’s standing with God are matters of heart and self. The interiority of Lois’ trial is, among other things, remarkably intimate. A far cry from the intermittent swooning Lois felt for Howard, this spiritual force envelops her entire being. Note the force’s quick, decisive movement; the force overwhelms each of her five senses as well as all the nooks and crannies of her brain. All the while, the shapeless form from a cathedral candle wick successfully undertakes to know Lois fully.

By comparison, Howard falls drastically short of this feat. Not only does Howard drearily consider dwelling in decrepit ruins so as to waste away forgetting her, it is *Lois* who initiates their correspondence and it is *Lois* who must venture to Wilmington. Nowhere in Fitzgerald’s narrative do readers find an inkling of Howard’s intentional pursuit of Lois. Contrarily, the spiritual force determinedly pursues her. Its effect is beyond her mental and physical comprehension. Moreover, not even the godly Kieth — who felt a kindred, mysterious voice convert him years before — can provide a satisfying explanation. However, Kieth’s inability to know the force’s agenda completely does not render him what Petry labels “all-too-human...[a] little...too late,” but simply human (37). Notwithstanding, the occurrence of her young life during Mass that afternoon was something entirely *other*.

Lois' incident within the chapel results in her inevitable fainting. From unconsciousness, she wakes to Kieth and his peers tending to her comfort. Insisting she recovered her sensibilities, a war beyond the sight of man wages in her heart. She thinks to herself, "But though a warm peace was filling her mind and heart she felt oddly broken and chastened, as if someone had held her stripped soul up and laughed" (Fitzgerald, "Benediction" 155). Internally, a juxtaposing sensation of fulfillment and peace within her heart — a feeling never once felt with Howard — lay cold against an alien perception of humiliation. Allen succinctly summarizes Lois' reaction: "Lois faints after the candle flame is extinguished by the goodness streaming through the saint in the window, and she feels that her naked soul has been held up to someone's scrutiny and ridicule" (44). The spiritual force exposed her heart and soul for what lay within. Because Fitzgerald attributed no clear voice to this force, one cannot condemn it of ridicule. In conjunction with the "incense [now] sweetly peaceful upon the air" and the refrain of song within her heart, I argue that only the case for tenderness and a love stronger than that of earthly men can be made.

Yet, the spiritual force does not leave her in a state of perpetually crippling despair. Instead, not only is Lois lulled into fainting by the pleasant ambiance, but once awake, the warming awareness of peace accompanies her once more. In other words, this force of peace acts as bookends— steadfast in both presence and character. Fitzgerald's description of this force (i.e., loving, tender, steadfast,

peaceful, fulfilling, overwhelming, honest, revealing, etc.) aligns intimately with the nature of the Christian God, as Jeremiah knew Him. Just one chapter beyond the aforementioned biblical prophecy, God visits Jeremiah again. Off the heels of a biting indictment, God says,

Return, faithless Israel, declares the LORD. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, declares the LORD I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt, that you rebels against the LORD...Return, O faithless children, declares the LORD for I am your master; I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion. And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding (English Standard Version, Jer. 3.12-15)

A brief comparison between God's bitter declaration unto Israel — those whom He still refers to as His children — and the force of goodness befalling Lois demonstrates a potent likeness. Beginning with God's refrain asking for Israel's reconciliation with him, the force appears to bring Lois before the "blessed" character of God. At the very least, she is pushed before a force releasing her from previously troubling tension. In addition, God's only requisite is that His children admit their wrong in their returning. Perhaps the "broken and chastened" sensation Lois retains is the understanding that a wrong has been committed in opposition to something that shows her nothing but sweetness (155). Lastly,

Jeremiah is imparted with a promise from God to assure the people of Israel following their publicized guilt. They are promised Zion — the heavenly city of eternal rest recorded in the Bible — and guides like God to usher them to the everlasting land of security. Lois' revival strikes an uncanny resemblance. She rises to reassurance of health and in the presence of a community of godly men.

Attention given to her by these men possess a sweetness. Lois mistakenly regards the care she receives with a misplaced shame, perhaps for being weak or silly. Rather, Lois' sense of humiliation truly originates from observing — through the conduit of this spirit — a mirror-image of her soul's condition. From the beginning, she rebuts constructive religion and knowingly dismisses the conscience written on her heart for the enjoyment of earthly pleasure. From the shame elicited therein, Lois is physically overcome. Yet, for all the spirit's outmatched power and subsequent influence on her, Lois remains resolute in her rejection. In better spirits, she unveils to Kieth the “inconvenience” she ascribes to Catholic, or religious, living (Fitzgerald, “Benediction” 155). Furthermore, she purports — based on the lesser force of love in Howard — that intelligence is found lacking in the community “believ[ing] in Supernatural Christianity” (Fitzgerald, “Benediction” 155). Christianity — which she likens with Catholicism — for Lois constitutes a lack of freedom and close-mindedness. Her qualifiers of orthodox Christianity, therefore, define a religion whose God cannot abide in anything ethically gray “like birth control” (Fitzgerald,

“Benediction” 156). Referring to birth control, one may deduce Lois’ persistent preoccupation with taboo, premarital sex. Thusly, when the ecclesiastical dust settles, Fitzgerald’s young heroine refuses to abide, in turn, with a God opposing the cisterns of lust from which she drinks.

Perhaps Fitzgerald demonstrates Lois’ surrender to cisternal pleasure most in the final sentences of the story. From the perspective of two Baltimore Station telegraph clerks, Lois’ final intentions are unveiled. The first clerk points her out to the second using her apparel as a marker. To delineate her from the crowd, the clerk remarks on her beauty slightly covered by “the big black dots on her veil” (Fitzgerald, “Benediction” 158). So as to conceal her identity by placing a barrier between her and onlookers, Lois dons a veil. Such an accoutrement elicits thoughts of mourning or marriage. In the case of Lois, I purport returning to Howard is an occasion for both. Explaining why he called the other clerk over, the first man confides, “[A] minute ago she came in with a telegram all written out and was standin’ there goin’ to give it to me when she changed her mind or somep’n and all of the sudden tore it up” (158). According to the clerk’s account, Lois stood at the edge of a personal Rubicon: either she remain in Baltimore or charge into Wilmington. With the former, she remains and considers the supernatural experience she just had while possibly returning to Kieth and the solace of their kinship. With the latter, she plunges into the cold pools of the unknown where the only relief is temporary sexual pleasure.

Lois' decision is both clear and boldly stated. Originally, she penned a thirteen-word reply: "This is in the way of a permanent goodbye. I should suggest Italy. 'LOIS'" (Fitzgerald, "Benediction" 159). Referring to Howard's earlier letter, Lois sarcastically tells him where to go to dream their relationship away. Moreover, carefully chosen diction in "permanent goodbye" suggests not only that she resolves to part from him, but there is no chance for a future reconciliation. As the second clerk silently reads her telegram, he inquires, "Tore it up, eh?" (159). Rightly confused, the clerk — like the readers — deduces an extreme shift in Lois. At the first, Lois outrightly rejects Howard. Moments later, however, she oscillates toward an opposite — yet equally as harsh — reaction in tearing the note. A small detail indeed, but nevertheless telling, is the fact that Lois simply drops the two pieces of paper down to the ground. As if to declare on the very ground she stands upon, Lois buries, as it were, any notion of leaving Howard. While she seemingly overcomes the cowardice she so openly despises at the beginning, her will to proceed into promiscuity is undeniable.

Such predilection to sin and fleshly desire Fitzgerald was certain to have learned at Newman. Through lessons of Catholic theology concerns, namely original sin, the young Fitzgerald learned of humanity's innately broken nature and, thusly, the desire to pursue further brokenness. His Newman studies most likely substantiated the brokenness of man with biblical expositions like Romans 1:18-25. Writing to Jewish converts and Roman Christians, St. Paul explains,

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened... Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts over to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever (English Standard Version, Rom. 1.18-25, italics added).

In Lois' hopeless exchange of an intimate encounter with God for nestling into the rut of Howard — devoid of security and assurance — Fitzgerald captures humanity's propensity for both error and apostasy.

Lois' willful choice to abandon faith for lack of a better idea is, of course, nothing new. Fitzgerald's heroine joins the throng of ancient Israel. Returning to the Book of Jeremiah, God states that His "people have changed their glory for that which does not profit" (*English Standard Version*, Jer. 2.12). For a common point of reference, the language God uses with Jeremiah harkens back to the Exodus narrative of golden calf idolatry. In the case of the Israelites, an idol took the place of a relationship with God. For Lois, it was love and lust that supplanted

a moral vision for her life. Hesitation — or even an ambiguous sense that Howard may be the wrong choice — failed to deter her. Rather, Lois' thirst for pleasure willed the "sweetness" she truly wanted into a full submission. Just as the Israelites do, Lois forsakes a higher reality out of an unbelief, and opts for a lesser sustenance she knows will not satisfy her. Far from anything concrete, the ethereal dream of nuptials floated rosily in her mind, yet disturbed by enticing lust. Her lust, therefore, embodies the cistern. Her choice to dismiss God and drink from it knowingly epitomizes cisternal guilt.

Akin to Lois, *This Side of Paradise*'s Amory Blaine, possesses an ardor for women stronger than that of God. With no true, biological father-figure and an indulgent mother who sends him to boarding school, Amory's sole spiritual guidance is that of Monsignor Thayer Darcy— a priest for whom Amory forms a fondness. Graduating from preparatory school, Amory gains admission into Princeton. While there, ambition and poetry demote any sense of his spirituality. Furthermore, his stint of service in World War I disrupts any spiritual development. Flippantly remarking on his change of heart to old Princeton pal Tom P. D'Invilliers, Amory says, "I confess that the war instead of making me orthodox, which is the correct reaction, has made me a passionate agnostic... This crisis-inspired religion is rather valueless and fleeting a best" (Fitzgerald, *Paradise* 150-151). Perhaps Amory's greatest stumbling block lay in his search for a meaningful relationship with a woman. Through countless romantic pursuits

— ranging in casualness — he seeks to find himself in reciprocal love. For Amory, an emotional, physical, and mental connection is the context in which his most vulnerable, hidden thoughts can experience the light. Yet, multiple attempts to realize his identity in this way fail and devastate him so. Following a break-up, Amory turns his attention to industry and philosophy. In the wake of his new pursuits, readers observe the lingering pain of failed love as well as a new, more hostile attitude towards God. Amid the conclusion of his novel, Fitzgerald explains this sad and decisive mentality, writing,

There was no God in his heart, he knew; his ideas were still in riot; there was ever the pain of memory;...the faint stirring of old ambitions and unrealized dreams. But—oh Rosalind!
Rosalind!... ‘Its all a poor substitute at best,’ he said sadly...He stretched out his arms to the crystalline, radiant sky. ‘I know myself,’ he cried, ‘but that is all.’ (261)

Existentially perplexed and in emotional tatters, Amory reflects that all other joys and pursuits in life are mere “substitutions.” His epiphany, though, evokes only sorrow and anger. As does Lois, Amory despairingly resigns himself from any hope. Indeed, his own rudderless identity is based on who he is— a maddening, circular path from God. While Lois does not explicitly forsake God here, agreeing to meet Howard in Wilmington, North Carolina, the coming Wednesday certainly betrays a self-constructed moral sensibility.

However staunchly against religion Fitzgerald — and consequently, his characters Lois, Beatrice O’Hara, and Amory Blaine — stood by 1920, the harsh rhetoric against it demonstrates an equally strong, though negative, intimacy with God. Edward Gillin concludes his essay with a similar insight. Gillin remarks, “Indeed the strong emotion that pervades ‘Benediction’ suggests Fitzgerald’s continued susceptibility to religious inspiration. While it is true that Fitzgerald had left... Catholicism by...1920, ‘Benediction’ presents...evidence that the spiritual conscience engendered by his religious training remained an active intellectual force” (48). No, for the young author would grow in prosaic fame consistently fighting — often losing — the very temptations his characters battled and lost to. As both “Absolution” and *Gatsby* will illuminate next, the cisterns of significance beguile men into believing they can thwart the eyes of God.

Chapter 3 *Gatsbyesque Gods: Fitzgerald's "Absolution" and "One of My Oldest Friends"*

By the time Fitzgerald finished writing *The Great Gatsby* in early October of 1924, the exhausted author had ridden a radiant, but tumultuous three-year ascension. During this brilliant arch between 1920 and 1923, Fitzgerald churned out two novels, two novellas, and two short story collections: *This Side of Paradise* (1920), *Flappers and Philosophers* the same year, *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), and *Tales of the Jazz Age* five months later in September of 1922. Less than a year following *Tales of the Jazz Age*, Fitzgerald penned the final lines of short story "Absolution" in June of 1923. His short, yet masterful gem would not surface until a year later when it appeared in the 1924 June issue of *American Mercury*. "Absolution" obviously preceded his masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby*, but, a closer examination of Fitzgerald's meticulously kept ledger proves he finished composing "Absolution" just mere weeks before beginning *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, "Ledger" 7).

Despite fame brought on by both magnetism and the aforementioned rigorous productivity, Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda bore up under the immense pressures of debt. Arthur Mizener's renowned biography, *The Far Side of Paradise: A Biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, follows the author's financial and familial tempests with detail. Mizener writes:

Early in May 1925 the Fitzgeralds reached Paris from the south of France and there they rented an apartment at 14 rue de Tilsitt...

[Maxwell] Perkins [his editor] cabled about Gatsby...

EXCELLENT REVIEWS. The sales continued to be, by Fitzgerald's standards, mediocre, though the reviews were the best he had ever had. By the time Gatsby was published, his debt to Scribner's was something over \$6,200; by October the sales were just short of twenty-thousand copies, slightly below what would have covered this debt. By February a few thousand more copies had been sold and [then,] the book was dead. (178-179)

Although a less than impressive sales record for *Gatsby* may be hard to conceive in 2018, early reception found Fitzgerald direly wanting of financial security. As Mizener reports, the lingering, February chills of 1926 brought with it a quandary. Fitzgerald needed to sell, and quickly. Complicating circumstances even further, he and Zelda were no longer living for themselves. Their daughter, Frances "Scottie" Scott Fitzgerald was now five and had needs just like any other child. At this point, Fitzgerald was a family man, and the burden of provision weighed upon him more heavily than ever before.

Desperate and having quenched his readership with Gatsbyesque golden carnivals and the Daisy Buchanans of the world, the author responded that very February by compiling previously unpublished short stories. Albeit Fitzgerald

published “Absolution” in *American Mercury*, he had not sold rights to the story until February 26th, 1926. For the handsome sum of \$2717.33 — per his ledger — Fitzgerald sold the rights to “Absolution” to Scribner & Sons. Alongside the rights of nine other stories, Scribner & Sons published *All the Sad Young Men*, an apt title for the burdened Fitzgerald. *All the Sad Young Men* contained nine short works. In comparison to every other yarn of *All the Sad Young Men*, “Absolution” shares a unique, “cisternal kinship” with *Gatsby*. The author himself wrote to Maxwell Perkins, concerning the Catholic spirit he intended to use for *Gatsby*. Persistent for its inclusion, Fitzgerald admits in *Trimalchio: An Early Version of the Great Gatsby*, that he resurrected previously scrapped material from “early efforts” of *Gatsby* in order to create “Absolution” (Fitzgerald, *Trimalchio*). Indeed, certain pieces of Fitzgerald’s intended preface for *The Great Gatsby* ultimately took the form of “Absolution.” Eleven-year old Rudolph Miller of “Absolution” fills in for readers the ethereal origin of the shady millionaire.

“Absolution” presents the religious unraveling of a young boy named Rudolph. Fitzgerald’s darkly Catholic short story begins and ends with a face-to-face confession from Rudolph to his local priest, Father Adolphus Schwartz. As the boy begins to explain why he sits in the priest’s office, a revelation of fear and avoidance unfolds. Rudolph unveils to Father Schwartz his absence from Confession and the disagreement he had with his father, Carl Miller. Utilizing flashback, readers observe Rudolph’s eventual coercion into Confession. While

there, Rudolph lies when asked about particular sins. In his deception, a crippling guilt grows in his mind and soul. The result of his guilt is an avoidance of his father, future Confession, and ultimately God. He achieves avoiding such authorities in his life by way of parting from reality, and assuming a disassociated identity: Blatchford Sarnemington. According to Roy F. Baumeister, Karen Dale, and Kristin Sommer's take on Freudian defense theory, Rudolph exhibits the behavior of dually function mechanism: *isolation* and *undoing*. In other words, the young boy divorces himself from his parents by first "creat[ing] a mental gap or barrier between some threatening cognition and other thoughts and feelings" (Baumeister, Dale, and Sommer 1099). Simultaneously, as Blatchford is acted outwardly in the physical (i.e., Rudolph assumes Blatchford in the literal sense), Rudolph *undoes* or "alters [his] past so as to make [his] particular misfortune" null and void (Baumeister, Dale, and Sommer 1096). Such an identity — along with Father Schwartz frightening advice in handling his troubles — justifies his cisternal desire for power. Furthermore, by dissociating himself from his pedigree, he assumes a power to alter destiny and an ultimate authority, namely over God. Similarly, while explaining to Nick Carraway the night of Myrtle Wilson's death, Jay Gatsby not only denied his parents but also ran from his Midwestern home just before his adolescence. Gatsby — who altering his name from the midwestern Germanic *Gatz* — also assumed a significance and agency on level with God. Seeking to alter the past — a feat to which Nick

Carraway famously replies is impossible — assumes a sovereignty over time. Baumeister, Dale, and Sommer agrees with Nick Carraway; “associated with symbolically magical behaviors and obsessional neuroses,” Rudolph and Jay Gatsby’s kindred psychopathy of *undoing* — though understandably a result of fear from God and insignificance — “is impossible and hence pathological” (Baumeister, Dale, and Sommer 1096).

I posit, however, that *Gatsby* and “Absolution,” share far more than just mental disillusionment, neurotic obsession, and a common, literary lineage. Rather, they are a connecting bridge between the tensions of the author’s inner man: the altar boy and the apostate. Mizener informs us that even Fitzgerald’s decision of the title for *Gatsby* elicited his religious inclination. He writes:

His use of a narrator [testifying on behalf of Jay Gatsby] allowed Fitzgerald to keep clearly separated for the first time in his career the two sides of his nature, the middle-western Trimalchio and the spoiled priest who disapproved of but grudgingly admired him. Fitzgerald shuffled back and forth between their attitudes in his attempt to find a title for the book. (171)

Due to the rising tide of debt, marital strife, and an ever-present proclivity towards religion, Fitzgerald needed an avenue of release and expression. Prolonged, inner conflict with the addition of external pressures weighed down on him immensely. If only for a moment, circumstance, having Fitzgerald stripped to bare essence,

yielded *Gatsby* and its intended preface of “Absolution.” Indeed, these two narratives of religious impropriety and, in turn, worldly escapism provided Fitzgerald with a cathartic mode of coping and a current declaration of his religious outlook.

Insistent on using the religious material for “Absolution,” Fitzgerald draws from the intermingling connections between his own true beginnings and Jay Gatsby’s rambling days of youth. Both the writer and the seedily cool millionaire spent a season of life in the chill of Minnesota — Fitzgerald, in the capital of St. Paul, and Gatsby, the school of St. Olaf in the southern snatch of the frostbitten state. In addition, both men by “instinct,” perhaps, attended for a time a school of the parochial ilk only to leave “dismayed at its ferocious indifference to the drums of...destiny” (*Gatsby* 99). For Fitzgerald’s personal account, Nick Carraway’s sentiment here might have been a bit of hyperbole. However, both men would leave the sustainment of their religious cisterns by the conviction that something, some superior force of the universe beckoned them to a grander destiny. Despite his perceptible reasons for a waning faith — controversial, such as they are — the truth about F. Scott Fitzgerald, such as it is, remains: a Catholic, he *was*.

At the time of *Gatsby*’s release in 1925, Fitzgerald had all but dismissed the personal worship of God. The Almighty, however, became the fodder for Fitzgerald’s fiction. His preoccupation and almost playful curiosity with religion remained frequent, but meandered — like his own faith — to a mild hostility.

With “Benediction” five years prior in 1920, we found Fitzgerald’s treatment of religion benign, if not faintly benevolent. By the end of his debut novel, *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald’s angsty protagonist, Amory Blaine, shakes a fist at God, saying — for all intents and purposes — I will not know you, but *will* to know only me. Though Amory’s reaction was incendiary, passion and fear lay dormant and painfully repressed behind the bravado. An inkling of desire to maintain intimacy may yet live in Amory — just as it may have in Fitzgerald himself — but for fear remains distant and hostile.

However clear in “Benediction,” the vague notion of a benevolent God decidedly stagnates with “Absolution.” Rather, God’s will — and especially His people — appear both cursed and ineffectual. Fitzgerald riddles “Absolution” with despairing men, symbolic of multiple generations within the crumbling church. With his title alone, he shrewdly elicits a sense of the spiritual. The term *absolution* carries with it a connotation paradoxical to its meaning. Borrowed from classical Latin *absolūtiō* (*ab* = from [sin]; *solvere* = to free) at the turn of the 13th-Century, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *absolution* as “Remission or forgiveness of sins declared by ecclesiastical authority; an instance of this.” A juxtaposing hint of weighty, portending judgment contrasts with the joyous reality of *absolution*. Though a guilty person may experience painful contrition, the inevitable result is a release from burden.

Fittingly, Fitzgerald's Aesop-like tale begins with a priest, Father Adolphus Schwartz, in the tumults of spiritual agony. While the reason for his pain is abstract, Fitzgerald provides a clear reason writing, "[Father Schwartz] wept because the afternoons were warm and long, and he was unable to attain a complete mystical union with our Lord" (78). The inclusion of *our* suggests a subtle agreement between the narrator, perhaps Fitzgerald, and the readers—a shared Lord, however mystical communion with Him may be. Compounding his struggle, Father Schwartz exhibits a paranoid aversion to the resonance of children and the aromas of town. It is as if the world drips with an uncleanness in which godliness cannot survive.

From the priest's ordeal, Fitzgerald zooms out for an idyllic, Hemingway-esque panorama of Minnesotan-Dakota wheat country. Terse descriptors of the land lure us back into Father Schwartz's inner man as Fitzgerald writes, "[One] afternoon when he had reached the point where [his] mind runs down like an old clock" (78). Irving Malin keenly diagnoses his ailment saying, "The priest is... somewhat crazy. But only he knows about his condition. He cannot reveal his problems to anyone; he cannot, for the time being confess" (210). Intimate knowledge of Father Schwartz's turmoil positions the narrative quite well. Unfortunately for Rudolph Miller — as well as every member of his congregation — the shepherd of their Dakotan Swede-town is guilty of a false gospel. Moreover, he nourishes the vulnerable Rudolph with this worldly salvific

message; the message, in turn, provides the boy with an impetus for ultimate apostasy.

In his essay “The Mystery of Ungodliness: Renan’s *Life of Jesus* As a Subtext for F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and ‘Absolution,’” Bryce J. Christensen remarks on the utter failure of Father Schwartz’s ministerial care to the boy. Christensen writes, “And what is particularly strange in ‘Absolution’ is that Father Schwartz... confirms and encourages Rudolph’s predisposition for the secular mystery of idealistic self-creation” (22-23). In other words, Fitzgerald had a servant of the church feed the disillusionment of the next generation. Furthermore, the priest used both the boy’s guilt and cisternal desire for significance to proclaim his own deviance.

Indeed, Fitzgerald explores the concept of sinful guilt in the “beautiful, intense boy of eleven named Rudolph Miller” (Fitzgerald, “Absolution” 78). Son of a Midwestern frigate man, Rudolph is presented before local priest Father Schwartz. The agenda of the meeting is straightforward: confession. Yet, as Rudolph manically rattles off the account of his prior sins, we see that his narrative is undeniably complex. He empties himself before Father Schwartz saying,

On Saturday, three days ago, my father he said I had to go to confession, because I hadn’t been for a month, and the family they go every week, and I hadn’t been. So I just as leave go, I didn’t

care. So I put it off till after supper because I was playing with a bunch of kids and father asked me if I went, and I said 'no,' and he took me by the neck and he said 'You go now,' so I said 'All right,' so I went over to church. And he yelled after me: 'Don't come back till you go.' (79)

Though quite extended, this initial confession divulges much and on it pivots the plot. Up until the end of the boy's tale, readers could very well mistake him for an absent-minded lad, focused on the ventures of youths. Nevertheless, Rudolph makes plain the spiritual disconnect in his life. Perhaps more oppressive is the relationship he seemingly shares with his father, Carl Miller. Their kindred blood appears held together by Catholic legalism and physically abusive reinforcement of those legalities. Furthermore, isolation compounds his strife. His admission finds the entire Miller clan faithful in attending confession, save for himself. Father Schwartz likely observed the boy's month-long absence in the confessional. A small, Swedish Midwestern town comprised of families provides a priest ample opportunity to keep track, as it were, of his attendees to weekly rites. Regardless, Rudolph's lack of confession begs the question: what was he, or *who* was he during weekly confession? *Enter* Blatchford Sarnemington, Rudolph's über-confident alter-ego and escape from the scars of Catholic legalism, the bruises a physically abusive father, and the madness of Midwestern boredom.

Robert A. Martin — one of the few critics to actually acknowledge Rudolph's alter-ego, Blatchford Sarnemington — dives into their eerily contiguous mention of 4.00PM and other nuanced details. Martin's essay "The Hot Madness of Four O'Clock in Fitzgerald's 'Absolution' and *Gatsby*" analyzes the connections in light of their general continuity. Martin declares, "Rudolph's adolescent desire to escape into the world of Blatchford Sarnemington is...[a] fantasy of believing he is not the son of his parents" (231). Disassociation from one's parents — while accurate in view of their abuse and failures — misses the mark here. Martin falls short where Alice Hall Petry, too, errs. Perhaps Petry discusses the importance of Blatchford in greatest length and detail. Yet, while she correctly cites Blatchford as a lie by which Rudolph "raise[s himself] to a higher, even celestial level of selfhood," she fails to identify both the reason and consequence of Blatchford's given purpose (126).

Rudolph *needs* Blatchford for protection. Although the physical abuse he endures at the hands of his father, Carl, and the anxiety he experiences in church are physically separate, they are mentally and emotionally linked. Perhaps the intersection between the two appears most starkly before Rudolph and Carl fight in their home kitchen. In order to avoid communion, Rudolph drinks water— an act that would render him unable to receive the Body of Christ according to Catholic doctrine. Carl catches his son in the act and begins an interrogation. He determines Rudolph guilty and launches into a tirade yelling,

Maybe you care more about being a little bit thirsty than you do about your religion... You better look out!... If you're so forgetful that you can't remember your religion something better be done about it. First you begin to neglect your religion... the next thing you'll begin to lie and steal, and the next thing is the reform school!... Not even this familiar threat could deepen the abyss that Rudolph saw before him. He must either tell all now, offering his body for what he knew would be a ferocious beating, or else tempt the thunderbolts by receiving the Body and Blood of Christ with sacrilege upon his soul. And of the two the former seemed more terrible--it was not so much the beating he dreaded as the savage ferocity, outlet of the ineffectual man, which would lie behind it.

(84)

Rudolph, through fear of his earthly father, projects an equally as violent posture onto a heavenly Father. His dread is so severe, an escape from reality — much less from the church — is necessary for the young boy's sanity. Blatchford, with confident swagger, provides the existential space where Rudolph can deny his father and triumphs over him. Fitzgerald describes the boy's alter-ego as an identity coursing with “suave nobility... [who] lived in great sweeping triumphs” (83). The triumph of Blatchford protects the young mind from utter brokenness. Unfortunately for Rudolph, the man from whom he needs protection

represents — though incorrectly so — the religion that seeks to mend and satisfy. Therefore, Rudolph never truly receives the opportunity to appreciate the relief of God. Instead, cisterns of significance and power become the only savior. It is only a matter of course that Blatchford Sarnemington entertains and moves the boy to yearn for a similar lifestyle in the real.

While Rudolph needs emotional — and physical — protection from the aforementioned institutions, he explicitly declares that he “reserved a corner of his mind where he was safe from God, where he prepared the subterfuges with which he often tricked God. Hiding *now* in this corner he considered how he could best avoid the consequences of his mis-statement” (83, italics added). The present tense now points toward Rudolph’s current state of Blatchford. He uses — or rather is *used by* — Blatchford to hide from God. Terrified of God, he needs a stronger force to close ranks around him. Without this alter-ego, young Rudolph lacked the fortitude and cunning to evade the God of his conscience. Evasion results, inevitably, in Rudolph’s permanent adherence with an identity diametrically opposed to God. Likewise, Father Schwartz’s false gospel found itself most alive where “a whole lot of people get together in the best places... [only then] things go glimmering all the time” (90). His rumination elicited one thing from young Rudolph, the culmination of such a gospel: Blatchford Sarnemington. Rudolph Miller’s self-constructed identity evolves into both his *only* identity but also his salvation. These glimmering parties, filled with the

ecstasy of glimmering people, converged in what Blatchford stood for.

Blatchford, in effect, took on that “something ineffably gorgeous somewhere that had nothing to do with God” (91).

Assuming, for the moment, *Gatsby* and its distant cousin “Absolution” as two separate entities, Jay Gatsby sits on the far side of the same pew. Born into a home devoid of God, he emerges into God-like force of prominence. Although Jay Gatsby muddies the “God’s truth” regarding himself, the onus of his agency arises from an origin of ambiguity (Fitzgerald, “Absolution” 65). Known to the readers, however, are Gatsby’s humble, Midwestern roots. Through a rather theatrical sense of spiritual identity, Gatsby justifies a departure from his inferior pedigree of the penurious Gatz family. Fitzgerald, by way of *Gatsby*’s pensive narrator, Nick Carraway, concedes,

It was James Gatz...of North Dakota...[whose] parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people — his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all. The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God — a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that — and he must be about His Father’s business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty. (98)

Although Carraway continues with a more refined exposition of Gatsby's comeuppance with the help of Yukon metal-mogul Dan Cody, Gatsby's formative years still loom in relative obscurity. For the writer, however, Jay Gatsby had always been — among other, more redeeming qualities — an apostate. In an all-but-textual proof, behind Jay Gatsby's cisternal thirst for existential greatness lay the shadow of young, Rudolph Miller.

The God of *Gatsby* is thusly depicted as one who lives in the shadow of Jay Gatsby's prestige: Dr. T.J. Eckleburg. Looming over humanity (i.e., represented in all of *Gatsby's* characters) as it flails in incessant toil, the passive eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg bear witness to all brokenness and portend judgment. I believe Dr. Eckleburg's eyes result from Fitzgerald's understanding of a fearfully omniscient God with control over all things, from Gatsby's shady dealings with Meyer Wolfsheim in the city to Myrtle Wilson's death among the grotesque ash heaps. Tom Burnam's 1952 article "The Eyes of Dr. Eckleburg: A Re-examination of *The Great Gatsby*" attempts to magnify the agency of those looming eyes over Creation. Burnam posits,

And over it all brood the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg, symbols—of what? Of the eyes of God, as Wilson, whose own world disintegrates with the death of Myrtle, class them? As a symbol of Gatsby's dream[?]...Or—and I think this most likely— do not the eyes in spite of everything they survey, perhaps even because of it,

serve both as a focus and an *undeviating base, a single point of reference* in the midst of monstrous disorder? (12, italics added)

Burnam's final inquisitive note offers insight into Fitzgerald's inclusion of such a God-like stare. Italicizing "because" underscores my personal belief that Fitzgerald placed Dr. Eckleburg's gaze into the narrative to serve *as* God. Moreover, it follows that the *Gatsbyesque* God takes the form of a deistic symbol who possesses a vague sense of control and far-off judgment as opposed to the visceral God of "Absolution" who smites at will. Although the fear of such an authority never ceases, when Rudolph rejects — or isolates — a poignantly terrifying God and becomes Blatchford, the intensity of God falls to the wayside. Overtime, the power of God dulls into a nebulous symbol as the power of Rudolph become Gatsby rise .

Though God, monogamy, and familial ties seem to matter little to *Gatsby's* ensemble of characters, I argue that Dr. Eckleburg exists as a fixed anchor in the text for the benefit of a spiritually struggling author in a rapidly moving age. While Burnam stops shy of declaring the figure's purpose, I maintain those unflappable eyes fulfill Fitzgerald's consistent desire to keep the comforts of religion — albeit, a fearfully misunderstood religion — while indulging in cisterns filled with power and seductive flappers.

Dr. T.J Eckleburg's brooding disposition is not the only instance where Fitzgerald clearly incorporated religious metaphor and imagery. In point of fact,

another such short story — an ephemeral gem entitled “One of My Oldest Friends” —demonstrates a shift in Fitzgerald’s view of religion and its benefit. The author sold the story to *Woman’s Home Companion* in September of 1925— almost perfectly ensconced between *Gatsby* and “Absolution” with *All The Sad Young Men*. Matthew J. Bruccoli gathered these stories into a collection published in 1979 called *The Price Was High*. Bruccoli notes in an introduction to the story Fitzgerald’s hesitation regarding the story being sold to the *Saturday Evening Post*. He remarks, “Fitzgerald’s reservations about the story were well-founded. The use of a crucifix at the end represents one of his rare excursions into forced religious symbolism” (112).

While I concur with Bruccoli regarding Fitzgerald’s reticence to use Christian allegory, I would hardly deem it as a “rare excursion.” The modernist movement in American literature saw the popular rise of religious disillusionment. Moreover, Fitzgerald’s clever ending calls to mind the plot twists of O. Henry. For these reasons, the author had cause to be careful when showcasing religion in the positive. Yet, “One of My Oldest Friends” is one of half a dozen Fitzgerald short stories dealing directly with religion (i.e., “Benediction,” “Absolution,” and “Thank You for the Light”). Not to mention, four of his five novels refer directly — at least once — to religion or God Himself. Therefore, “One of My Oldest Friends” falls within good company. In giving further consideration, one must weigh the tale’s other elements at play.

Leading to his religious imagery at the story's conclusion, much of Fitzgerald's plot is driven by a rifted friendship between men who knew each other in their youth. If male friendship fails to ring a familiar bell with those who know Fitzgerald, perhaps the cause of tension between them will harken the likes of *Gatsby* and *This Side of Paradise*.

“One of My Oldest Friends” follows two male, old-time pals, Michael and Charley Hart. After learning that Charley is on the cusp of marriage, Michael and his wife, Marion, decide to invite him into town. Charley declines, claiming illness. Marion and Michael nevertheless go to his apartment when they stumble upon the party he is hosting. Both husband and wife leave shocked and outraged. Charlie's deception is nothing new, however, as Marion exposes Charley as a once-beguiling suitor who only feigned friendships with Michael in order to steal Marion away. With their friendship proven a farce, a crushed Michael is approached by a desperate Charley — unbeknownst of Michael's new knowledge — in dire financial straits. Michael declines aiding Charley but regrets doing so and quickly runs to catch his “oldest friend” before he leaves his life forever.

Towards the story's conclusion, Fitzgerald fashions a situation in which Michael is rendered lost and without hope. Among the trestles of a train station where he thinks Charley may be, Fitzgerald writes,

Suddenly his eyes...focused...upon one spot in the line of poles...

It was a pole just like the others and yet it was different—...And

watching it...something curious happened in his mind and instantly he saw everything in a completely different light. Something had come to him in a whisper of the breeze, something that had changed the whole complexion of the situation. It was this:...It became suddenly plain to Michael that...[for] one minute, one spot in time, all the mercy in the world had been vested in him. (123-124)

Michael, through an invisible agent, was passively filled with the transcendent quality of mercy—a quality not instinctually unique to human beings, but something otherworldly. In addition, this revelation coalesces in the illumination of one's mind to conform unto mercy. A worldly point-of-view would likely render Charlie guilty, and therefore, a lost cause. According to this mindset, Michael would do well to leave Charlie to his misguided ways. Yet, the crucifix-like pole inspires a transformation from earlier hostility and jealousy in Michael unto something else. In lieu of giving Charlie over to an uncertain end, its mere presence beckons Michael forward to risk his own life for the sake of a reprobate. One must note, however, that Michael had no indication of Charlie's whereabouts when running towards his location. In point of fact, the cross-shaped pole and its curious nature drew him towards Charlie. As if to imply the pole possesses a separate will, the religious object redirects, or renews, Michael's course. The

result is Christ-like laying down of one's life, according to a will seemingly above his own for the good of another.

What sets this pole — the object in which he received the will and power to show mercy — apart further from all else are threefold. First, Fitzgerald chooses *white* as its color, the hue of purity and the most brilliant form of light, likening it to notions of glory. Secondly, the white, horizontal “bar” fastened to a vertical pole indicates an intersection; this intersection implies a greater support, recalling the buttressing effect religion has on one's bearings in the world. Lastly, this intersection is specifically described as “crosswise.” Herein one finds the crucifix allusion Brucoli mentions. Both the physical setting of the crucifix symbol and the sensation leading Micheal unto it also evoke a spiritual element. Fitzgerald describes Michael's vantage point writing,

A little way ahead of him now was a stone bridge over the tracks and beyond that an interminable line of telephone poles which stretched in diminishing perspective toward an *endless horizon*....He would have given up [looking for Charley] before except for this sense he had that someone was walking very lightly and swiftly just ahead. (123, italics added)

Using diction like *endless horizon*, Fitzgerald provokes visions of heaven. The uniformity of all the poles — perfected and in close proximity like the heavenly multitude described in the Book of Revelation, chapter nine — are delineated

from one another only by the one assuming the form of a crucifix. As if led the cross, and ultimately, the salvation of Charley, Michael only continues to the endless horizon by the beckoning *sense* of an entity. This invisible specter takes the human form of *someone* in Michael's imagination. His perception describes the specter — whom I propose is Fitzgerald's take on the Holy Spirit — as a form walking just ahead of him. Here, Fitzgerald supplies Michael with a shepherd or guide to the cross, salvation, and, as the *endless horizon* dictates, eternal rest in heaven.

The climax and closing come paired together as Michael is led to deliver Charley from the certain death of an oncoming train. Michael's old friend stands dangerously close to the side of the track. While Fitzgerald never specifies whether or not Charley intends to jump, I posit that notions of suicide carried him to the very spot. Barely rescuing the reprobate Charley by diving at the man and knocking him down, *Saint* Michael gasps for air while consoling his disheveled friend. Charley, flummoxed, asks Michael how he found him. Michael answers pointing to the white crossbar, which hovered over his exact location. In true O. Henry fashion, the chilling twist down the spine comes in Charley's dumbfounded reply, "There isn't any crossbar" (125). Though not overtly religious, Fitzgerald's narrative suggests, even in a fantastical way, that something of faith can transcend petty, but painful deceit and differences between men and women. Moreover, this

faith in God — or something like Him — exists as a benevolent force with the reassuring tendency toward good providence.

Chapter 4 *Shining Light on the Tender and Addicted:
Fitzgerald's "Thank You for the Light"*

Vice flourishes under the cover of darkness. Like a thick blanket, the dark isolates and blinds the inhabitant of realities inches before their nose. Fitzgerald, well acquainted with these maxims, suffered the symptoms of vice and its interminable effect: addiction. The longer one resides within the shrouded, shameful anonymity of addiction, the more difficult it becomes to shine a light on such inner turmoil. Insecurities and doubt of a cure abound. Inevitably, addicts ask themselves in so many words, *What is the use, what difference will vulnerability make in all this? I'll never be rid of it anyway.* Addiction, though largely a neurobiological matter, physically manifests itself in a point of fixation. Where and on what the addict fixes the destructive attention defines their cisternal struggle.

Indeed, Fitzgerald sensed the impending hopelessness of his addiction to alcohol. While the cisterns Fitzgerald drank from manifested in alcohol or sex, the foundation for his idolatry can be traced back to comfort or security. Desiring security and seeking pleasure does not qualify as sinful behavior in and of itself according to the strict, biblical concept of the *cistern*. But, as Fitzgerald pursued these creature comforts at the expense of his marriage, craft, reputation, and ultimately God, his measures for security become an affront. Although he never outrightly mentioned the words *substance abuse*, his pleasure-seeking measures

were quite public, most viscerally so, by his personal disclosures in “The Crack Up” (1931). Amid the fallout of unleashing the controversial quasi-exposé of his woes, long-time confidant Ernest Hemingway rebuked the broken shell of a man. Scott Donaldson — an avid contributor to Fitzgerald scholarship — wrote an article entitled “The Crisis of Fitzgerald’s ‘Crack-Up.’” Regarding the rather nasty reception “The Crack-Up” netted, Donaldson testifies to Hemingway’s “[having] read *Tender Is the Night* and detecting traces of self-pity in the portrayal of Dick Diver” (174). Donaldson continues on with a direct quotation from Hemingway: “Forget your personal tragedy, [Hemingway] told Fitzgerald. ‘But when you get the damned hurt use it—don’t cheat with it’” (174). Hemingway’s philosophy to channel pathos into clean, honest prose was simply not Fitzgerald’s way. By 1932, the self-proclaimed *crack-up*’s writing became a poetic, but unfiltered extension of self. Throughout the next two years, Fitzgerald composed the last novel he published during his lifetime.

Though he penned the majority of its prose between June of 1932 and March of 1934, Fitzgerald’s early scribblings of *Tender Is the Night* dates back to 1926. Arthur Mizener, not prone to religious discourse in his biography on Fitzgerald, likens the author’s perseverance in pain with the plight of Dick Diver. He says, “[Fitzgerald’s] conception of what he was trying to do is reflected best in Dick Diver’s struggle [with Nicole]...Over and above his love for Zelda and his desire to save her, he had invested too much of his emotional capital...to be

anything but an emotional bankrupt if that relation failed” (222). Anyone with a casual knowledge of Fitzgerald’s marriage to Zelda and a memory of *Tender Is the Night* can draw a direct parallel with his star-crossed couple, Dick and Nicole Diver. E.W. Pitcher concludes as much in the closing of his essay “*Tender Is the Night: Ordered Disorder in the ‘Broken Universe.’*” Pitcher spends much of his text exploring the various threads of *Tender Is the Night*. Doing so, he establishes a rather helpful, structured set of thematics— including an interesting numerological survey of the novel and its commonalities with Fitzgerald’s discourse on schizophrenia. Perhaps Pitcher’s most insightful speculation of the author’s work comes in the end, however. He reckons:

Through the story of Dick and Nicole Diver, Fitzgerald means to convey a very complex set of themes with universal implications. He tried to diagnose not only the underlying tensions, the individual torments, and interpersonal conflicts of the Divers’ love-hate relationship, but also to generalize their private drama into a case history of twentieth-century malcontent...that nations as much as individuals suffer psychological breakdown. (87)

Mere months after publishing *Tender Is the Night* with Scribner & Sons in April of 1934, Fitzgerald composed a letter to his editor, Maxwell Perkins. His words suggest a cyclical, destructive life pattern rendering quality prose an impossibility. Fitzgerald reveals:

I am so exhausted that I drag out work on a story two hours when it should be done in one and go to bed so tired and wrought up, toss around sleepless, and am good for nothing next morning...to work up a creative mood there is nothing doing until four o'clock in the afternoon. Part of this is ill health...I have drunk too much and that is certainly slowing me up. On the other hand, without drink I do not know whether I could have survived this time.

(Mizener, *The Far Side of Paradise* 232)

Drinking produced both *inefficient* work and product. In response, Fitzgerald sought to produce more qualitative pieces, *deficient* of creative moxie apart from liquor. Caught amid a vicious war of worsening dependency that invariably effected output, Fitzgerald succumbed to the lie that reaching for the bottle was his sole solution. Undeniably, Zelda's condition provided impetus for dulling pain. Unfortunately — as addiction can only deliver — the temporary relief gin gave Fitzgerald also mollified the urgency of their situation. Mizener explains the author's destructive pattern of addiction with a potent simplicity. He shares:

All this disappointment and suffering had their effect on Fitzgerald. His drinking increased, and it made him subject to fits of nervous temper and depression and less capable of providing the regular life that Zelda needed. It also effected his work, for in spite of his attempts to persuade himself then, and later; that he could

only work with the help of gin, he was as inefficient as most people when he had been drinking. (222)

Just as any cistern functions, like an ineffectual medicine, alcohol's side effect not only required continued use but failed to address the root issue. As I established, the prophet Jeremiah bore the understanding that Israel's cisterns were *broken* and hence, lacked the ability to *retain* the water which filled them. Fitzgerald, like the Israelites, necessarily needed to continue filling the proverbial cup. Eventually, as the cyclical, age-old curse goes, the cup will run dry and the bearer bores further into the ground to retain more. Cursory readers of Fitzgerald's life may ask loaded questions like, "Why did he drink? Why could he not simply give it up?" Helpful questions ask not *why* but seek to establish a *what*. What compelled excessive substance abuse? Aside from consistent indulgence which lowered his threshold, what drove him to a life of intoxication? The answers are complex and begin long before this November letter to Maxwell Perkins. While his lifestyle as of 1934 stemmed from heavy drinking back at Princeton, I find his later fiction grants a strong rationale for addiction more so than anything else. Furthermore, these works demonstrate — with varying degrees of subtlety — a shift, perhaps, in Fitzgerald's view of religion and the God who governs it.

While *Tender Is the Night* (1934), remains particularly illuminating on Fitzgerald's addiction and existential woe, one short story he finished soon

thereafter long evaded limelight for almost a century. After being rejected by *The New Yorker*, *College Humor*, *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and others, Fitzgerald permanently buried “Thank You for the Light” in 1936. Cited in a 2012 issue of *The New York Times* “*ArtsBeat*,” only original manuscripts survived near eighty years until “Fitzgerald’s grandchildren discovered [the story] while going through his papers” (McGrath). His virtually unexplored vignette and *Tender Is the Night* are yarns sewn together with the common, gray thread of loneliness. Coincidence has no place in the discussion; master needler Fitzgerald wove the two tapestries from the simultaneous spools of his own, painful solitude. Their protagonists — driven by remarkable intelligence or a gifted skillset — do not succeed in growing old. The burden of loneliness motivates both *Tender Is the Night*’s Dick Diver and Mrs. Hanson, the central character “Thank You for the Light,” to lean on the addictive crutches of alcohol and nicotine. Via fiction, Fitzgerald waged war against his own demons. In response to his tribulations, I assert his consistent remedy included an active, literary God with a proclivity towards miraculous healing. However fantastical, the works display a Fitzgerald in distress hoping beyond hope in God’s direction as the end of his life crept into distant view.

Between these two pieces, however, Fitzgerald found himself facing two psychological breakdowns in the summer of 1935: Zelda’s and his own. Less than a year before Zelda began her incarcerated therapy in Asheville’s Highland Hospital, Fitzgerald ensconced himself in the Carolinian mountain north of town.

There, he sought to write and ultimately, engaged in adulterous companionship. Donaldson — in the aforementioned article on “The Crack-Up” — chronicles a protracted, but brutally honest account of Fitzgerald’s estate from that of his secretarial mistress, Mrs. Laura Guthrie. She journals:

He is completely alone because no persons are near to him, and he has no religion to comfort him. He makes me think of a lost soul, wandering in purgatory—sometimes hell. He tries so hard to drown it out with drinking and sex. Sometimes in the heights of these moments he forgets for a brief time—then it all comes back in overwhelming force. ‘Life is not happy’ as he says. It isn’t for him. He said it was a good thing he was not a rich man or he would have been dead long before now (killing himself with indulgences!) but that the necessity of doing work had kept him going. Now he hopes that life will continue to be just endurable, which will only be if he keeps enough health to work. (177)

Albeit condemning, Guthrie provides a roadmap for how to appropriately interpret the newly published “Thank You for the Light.” Moreover, she reemphasizes from a place of intimacy — and therefore, credibility — that Fitzgerald’s existence was both devoid of God and rife with cisternal idolatry (i.e., drinking, sex, and work).

In order to underscore the authority and value “Thank You for the Light” offers to both the mental and spiritual states of the author, I must first note one of its remarkably rare attributes. Articulated best by *Newsday*’s Nicolaus Mills in his article “F. Scott Fitzgerald’s ‘New’ Story Rounds Out Our View,” the *new* short story retains perfect authorial authenticity. Mills declares:

In the case of “Thank You for the Light,” the good news is that the one-page story required no editing. [The story] stands as Fitzgerald wrote it, so we don’t have to wonder about his intentions. Most writers who have their work published after their deaths have no such luck. Their unfinished art is finished by someone else, and they lose the authority death should give them over what they meant to say. (www.newsday.com)

Fitzgerald’s intent remains in pristine condition. His vignette submitted to no obscurities from third-party voices or bent to the off-chance assumption of even the most trustworthy copyeditor. Untouched, Fitzgerald’s voice speaks without blemish through “Thank You for the Light.” Half a decade following the buzz of “Thank You for the Light” appearing in *The New Yorker* — ironically so as it previously rejected the story — the story was published again. In 2017, Scribner’s — with the help of editor Anne Margaret Daniel — released *I’d Die for You* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The short work that lent the book its name is parenthetically titled “The Legend of Lake Lure,” a North Carolinian body of water located near

the isolated and agonizing Fitzgerald. With the exception of the first piece — “The I.O.U” written in 1920 — every tale of the subsequent eighteen was completed following 1932. In effect, the recent short story collection provides perhaps the clearest window into the heart and mind of the spiraling author. Two of these pieces are classified as Fitzgerald’s uncollected short fiction: “Ballet Shoes” and “Thank You for the Light.”

Renowned Fitzgerald scholar James L. West III wrote perhaps the most comprehensive and in-depth analysis of “Thank You for the Light” to date. Published in the 2013 issue of the *F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, West’s article ventures to connect Fitzgerald’s newly unearthed work to Ernest Hemingway’s “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.” In so doing, West kickstarts the article with a keen insight, grounded in historical background. He reports:

Fitzgerald sent ‘Thank You for the Light’ to [Harold] Ober on 19 June, with his accompanying note: Do you think this is any good? I thought it might amuse the New Yorker and pick up a few dollars. It’s an old idea I had hanging around in my head for a long time and didn’t do justice to it when I came to write it, but it seems to me too good to go back in the file. Do what you can with it. (1)

His wishful note relays a good deal more than when read at face value. His visible insecurity about the content’s adequacy — though understandable by 1936 — typifies Fitzgerald. Striking, however subtly hidden behind a blasé rationale, is the

author's attitude towards the spirit of the story itself. He concedes to Ober that the essence of "Thank You for the Light" is an *old* inspiration. Moreover, the idea for the tale of Mrs. Hanson apparently possessed enough allure for the man chasing an allusive pleasure to consistently mull over it. As stated, his mulling was not only steady but lingering. Ober's inherited directive — reading with a hint of finality — was to land the piece anywhere; but, anywhere ought to be *somewhere*. To Fitzgerald, the beauty of "Thank You for the Light" aired a verisimilitude too depressingly accurate of himself not to reach the light of day. At forty years old, especially to an author inspired by vitality and youth, Fitzgerald found himself a fading nova in a bright galaxy of newer, budding talent. While tending to the everlasting nag of bills, the writer also composed an intriguing combination his professional existence with that of his religious experience. Through Mrs. Hanson's nicotine addiction and otherworldly encounter, Fitzgerald unveils both his cistern and the God of his cistern.

In the uncanny twilight of life, Mrs. Hanson learns her well-furrowed and fertile sales territory no longer belongs to her. Though the "somewhat faded woman of forty" ages nicely, her business of selling corselettes and other feminine unmentionables of the time has shifted from the smaller hamlets of Illinois and Indiana (Fitzgerald, "Thank You for the Light" 321). Her transfer, Fitzgerald writes, is not a matter of being obsolete, but quite the opposite. Paradoxically, only in the waxing of her district control does Mrs. Hanson senses

her waning professional agency. With the opening of the piece, Fitzgerald informs readers that Mrs. Hanson “had known her [eastward] clientele chattily and was often offered a drink of a cigarette in the buyer’s office after business was concluded. But she soon found that in her new district...not only was she was never asked if she would smoke but several times her own inquiry as to whether anyone would mind was answered” (321). With disconcerting double-entendres of passive-aggression, he provides an example of a Midwestern acquiescence that communicates anything but affirmation. Mrs. Hanson hears the managerial reply, “It’s not that *I* mind, but it has a bad influence on the employees” (321). Of the sort who understands good salesmanship, Mrs. Hanson defers to the buyers. Yet, both the narrative and her momentary pause between realization and deference indicates a deeper disappointment. Fitzgerald guides the readers below the surface in the ensuing two paragraphs. For Mrs. Hanson, a simple smoke is anything but.

Six lines aptly reveal the exterior hardships that trigger the middle-aged woman to crave nicotine. Here, Fitzgerald showcases an effective succinctness. He writes, “Smoking meant a lot to her sometimes. She worked very hard and it had some ability to rest and relax her psychologically” (321). Mrs. Hanson prescribes *meaning* to her smoking habit. Not only do cigarettes harness her bodily anxieties, but daily drags usher in a mental ease as well. She necessitates — mentally, physically, and emotionally — the consolation of cigarettes to place distance between herself and work. Furthermore, she requires a potent sedative to

bring her down from such a high capacity for industry. Fitzgerald, in the same passage, notes that “[Mrs. Hanson] was a widow and she had no close relatives to write to in the evenings...[and] more than one moving picture a week hurt her eyes, so smoking had come to be an important punctuation mark in the long sentence of a day on the road” (321). Quite poetically, the author describes the tragedy by which the businesswoman inherited the premium for smoking.

Mrs. Hanson suffers a widow’s plight of loneliness. The matter is addressed only once, and done so in a passing fashion. Due to Fitzgerald’s ephemeral accounting for her widowhood, readers know nothing regarding her husband. Furthermore, context or further clues do not indicate how long Mrs. Hanson has been widowed, how her husband died, if the union was enjoyable or perhaps rocky. In light of all these mysterious gaps, we cannot ponder too long on the potential of her career resulting from an *early* death of her husband. What remains clear, however, is Mrs. Hanson’s intimate acquaintance with loss. Additionally, Fitzgerald tells readers a relationship with any member her extended family is a bygone conclusion for she has none to speak of. No one person fills her time or occupies her thoughts. West concurs in his aforementioned article. He proclaims, “The story is about *loneliness*. It is about some of the ways human beings avoid alienation and despair” (4, italics added). So, on those lonely evenings, cigarettes — namely the addictive nicotine therein — inhabit the place in her heart loved ones once did.

Perhaps the most viscerally saddening revelation comes from her dusk visits at the cinema. Once more, Fitzgerald spares detail. Because the account is a description of Mrs. Hanson's work routine, we may assume her habits have been cultivated over an extended duration of time. One imagines the coaxed hermit, Mrs. Hanson — past the nebulous demarcation of her *prime* — withdrawing from the fellowship of night life into the anonymity of a lonely theatre. Alone and enclosed in the darkened safety of cinematic escape, Mrs. Hanson attempts to backfill years of loneliness and the current angst of being misunderstood or judged.

Judgment of the woman comes quickly. Concluding the initial week of her new rotation, Mrs. Hanson receives an anxious “fascination” from the young, gentleman buyer whom she — over a cigarette — conducts business with (Fitzgerald, “Thank You for the Light” 322). Unlike the old days back eastward, the pleasure of lunch with the gentleman and her consequential business deal came separately of her true joy found in smoking. In lieu of mixing business with delight, Mrs. Hanson's successful enterprise arose as a “reward” for snubbing out her gratification. Dissatisfied and caught in the throngs of a clientele too busy for her or discourteously tardy, Mrs. Hanson senses this day “was one of those days full of waiting” (Fitzgerald, “Thank You for the Light” 322). She realizes soon thereafter the source of her intangible discontent; “she hadn't smoked since breakfast” (322). Surmising the narrative has reached the earlier part of late

afternoon — due to lunch passing and subsequent appointments mentioned — Mrs. Hanson goes without a smoke for less than 12 hours. Her interiority diagnoses the “vague dissatisfaction” she experiences. Through her own consciousness of lack manifests between business calls, Fitzgerald draws a parallel between pause and pain. In other words, the quiet intervals devoid of voice and interaction induce pain and, therefore, the need for a salve. Furthermore, we gain an understanding for her habit’s ever-increasing threshold of effectuality. Transactions and scores — no matter how profitable — which occupy the majority of her time and thought cannot satisfy her inner longings or establish a sufficient sense of purpose for her.

Through exemplifying Mrs. Hanson’s tendency for dual conversation, Fitzgerald divulges the obtrusiveness of her addiction. Resembling a hint of Nicole Diver’s schizophrenic behavior and Dick Diver’s brilliance amid alcohol abuse, Fitzgerald tells of Mrs. Hanson,

Aloud she would say, ‘We think we cover a different field. It’s all rubber and canvas, of course, but we do manage to put them together in a different way. A thirty per cent increase in national advertising in one year tells its own story.’ And to herself she was thinking: ‘If I could just get three puffs I could sell old-fashioned whale-bone.’ (322).

While she maintains high function — like Dick Diver’s ability to “keep alive the low painful fire of intelligence” (Fitzgerald, *Tender* 201) — Mrs. Hanson’s ambition for greater success lay in the next cigarette. All the while, she misses the apparent skillset she possesses and in so doing, Mrs. Hanson lives in the unreal. Where Fitzgerald guides her next is where the myriad of publications lost interest. I assert, as does Nicolaus Mills, those publications missed his intent.

Mills rightly states in his 2012 *Newsday* article that Mrs. Hanson — “shows us a softer side of Fitzgerald” — comes from the “personal account of his own depression...[and having] widened his sympathies” (2). The removal from his former self, Mills states, results in *The New Yorker*’s correct sense of the unfamiliarity in “Thank You for the Light.” Yet, he fails to go further like James Campbell’s response to the short story. On behalf of the *Times Literary Supplement*, Campbell composed a review “Shedding Light” in reply to James West’s article. Speaking on West’s view, Campbell writes,

His view is that it is ‘unlike the writing that New Yorker editors associated with FSF, but he was tired of writing about his prom girls and weary of manufacturing trick plots about romance and love’. The story is full of — light. Mr West believes that Fitzgerald was attempting some kind of ‘answer’ to another story with that word in the title, though it is a dark story: Hemingway’s ‘Clean Well-Lighted Place’... (Campbell, “Shedding Light”)

Once more, I am convinced that critique must go one degree deeper. While Campbell astutely claims “Thank You for the Light” as Fitzgerald’s attempt at some answer, it is much larger than a retort to Hemingway’s nihilistic flash piece. No, rather Fitzgerald broods over — chalk in hand — an algorithmic cure for the widowed and brokenhearted: God.

Indeed, the author positions the lonely, wandering widow before a Catholic cathedral. As if incarnate on the evening breeze, the church appears abruptly. Just as sudden is Mrs. Hanson’s *gestalt* revelation. She contemplates, “...if so much incense had gone up in the spires to God a little smoke in the vestibule would make little difference. How could the Good Lord care if a tired woman took a few puffs in the vestibule” (322). Mrs. Hanson’s scheme uncovers two of her presuppositions. Firstly, drawing into the place of God connotes security and her freedom to be — in the metaphorical sense — naked and unashamed. Secondly, she assumes — in presumptuously supposing a passivity in God — a kind tenderness in the *Good* Lord to look benevolently upon the sensibilities of a distressed woman. Prompted by these sentiments of safety, unlike the numbing cinema pictures, she ventures into the church. With an unlit cigarette and no match handy, she searches for prayer candles to emblazon the the hopeful butt. Attempting to exploit a candle symbolic of “votive offerings” — an act the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as something “offered or consecrated in fulfillment of a vow” — an elderly man not clearly defined as clergy or layman

explains they put them out at night. He then wonders whether Mrs. Hanson's presence in the church was brought on by a desire to prayer. She lies.

Fitzgerald concedes to Mrs. Hanson's unfaithfulness in prayer. Her beguiling attempt at prayer harkens back to *Benediction's* Lois who, despite her unbelief, vainly kneels to pray. Not knowing either how or what to pray, she notices looming over her an "image of Madonna gaz[ing] down upon her from a niche, six feet above her head" (Fitzgerald, "Thank You for the Light" 323). After paying an ambiguous sense of reverence to the Madonna, she retreats back to the pew, where a gentle slumber overfalls her. Disregarded as a deviation from Fitzgerald's ilk, the implementation of a religious miracle provides Mrs. Hanson not only with the temporary relief of yet another cigarette, but also an illumination of another sort. She "puff[s] to keep the flame alive...[and looking] up again at the Madonna's vague niche in the half darkness...[she says.] 'Thank You for the light'" (Fitzgerald, "Thank You for the Light" 323). At the inadequacy of it, Mrs. Hanson — tired and depressed — manages the energy for a kneeling position once more to offer a repetition, much like a refrain. The widow inflects, "Thank you *very* much for the light" (Fitzgerald, "Thank You for the Light" 323, italics added). In effect, Mrs. Hanson recognizes, at much effort to herself, that the act extended from God, evidenced by her impulse to kneel again in acknowledgement. Moreover, the repetition of thankfulness for the light implies *two* lights: a physical and a spiritual. Fitzgerald, indeed, necessitated both.

West, though an accomplished scholar on Fitzgerald, I believe disavows the agency of prayer in the story and delineates himself from the author's purposes for employing it. The critic assesses prayer — what Mrs. Hanson, and inadvertently Fitzgerald himself engages in — as “a meaningless exercise that nevertheless brings comfort and peace” (6). Not only does Fitzgerald ascribe a definitive comfort or peace to God's ability to answer back, but it reads as the antidote he knew to be the answer. Yet, he had not conviction within himself to enact on this side of Paradise.

Chapter 5 *Valediction: No Farewells for a Fitzgerald*

On a frigid, December afternoon in 1939, Frances Scott Fitzgerald received a correspondence from her father, Scott, postmarked Hollywood, California. Since the autumnal change in 1937, Fitzgerald wrote copy for the moving pictures in Tinsel Town. However, the streets were hardly gold for an aging and, all things considered, *broken* Fitzgerald. He frequently wrote to his daughter Frances — or Scottie — using his customary term of endearment for her. “Dear Pie:...” Fitzgerald begins:

Since I stopped picture work three months ago, I have been through not only a T.B. flare-up, but also a nervous breakdown of such severity that for a time it threatened to paralyze both arms— or to quote the doctor: ‘The Good Lord tapped you on the shoulder.’ While I am running no fever above 99, I don’t know what this return to picture work is going to do, and when and if my health blows up, you know what a poor family man I am... (*The Crack-Up* 289)

A nervous breakdown inducing temporary paralysis, T.B., and the thought of returning to cinema aside, Fitzgerald loved his daughter and continued to assume a familial responsibility. However, the sheer expectancy of future health complications — describing the prospect of them as one would a ticking bomb — crystallizes a sense of resignation in the man.

Despite his resignation, his physician's reference to the "Good Lord" resonated strongly enough for Fitzgerald to share such an anecdote with Scottie. Behind the wan cheekiness of the comment, one cannot help but gather that the sickly Fitzgerald embraced it somehow. Perhaps the God of the universe, after all his spiritual ambivalence and all his drinking, nudged him to listen or open his eyes. As if his deteriorating health were providence unto a greater way, then, in the least, a hope lay ahead of him. Almost twenty years prior, a zealous and sprightly Fitzgerald — just beginning the finer, final strokes on *This Side of Paradise* — wired a telegram to longtime Princeton pal Edmund "Bunny" Wilson from his home in St. Paul, Minnesota. He writes:

Dear Bunny, ...I am deep in the throes of a new novel. Which is the best title[?] (1) The Education of a Personage (2) The Romantic Egotist (3) This Side of Paradise... Since I last saw you I've tried to get married & then tried to drink myself to death but foiled, as have been so many good men, by the sex and the state I have returned to literature... I am ashamed to say that my Catholicism is scarcely more than a memory—no that's wrong it's more than that; at any rate I go not to the church nor mumble stray nothings over chrystaline beads. (*The Crack-Up* 254)

At twenty-four years young, Fitzgerald had Gatsbyesque visions for his life, visions of himself in which the trajectory must always go up. Yet, even in his

glowing and atmospheric dreams, the God of his youth seemed little more to him than perhaps the passive clockmaker deity akin to the looming eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg.

George Wilson, staring deep into the moon-like, spectacled eyes declares, “God knows what you’ve been doing, everything you’ve been doing. You may fool me, but you can’t fool God” (*Gatsby* 159). While *The Great Gatsby* made sparing mention of God — mostly in the vulgar manner — Fitzgerald uses lowly mechanic George Wilson to make a poignantly dogmatic statement. No one can hide from God. I maintain that Fitzgerald, even at the pinnacle of his prosaic magnetism, never hid from the God of his youth. Rather, the high priest of the Jazz Age spent his entire literary career loitering at the edges of religion. Whether he drew upon the elements of mysticism or providence or peered into the lives of priests as he did in “Benediction” and “Absolution,” or tugged at the depravities of humanity as in “Thank You for the Light” and *Tender Is the Night*, God never seemed far from his thoughts.

In the latter, aforementioned letter, Fitzgerald affirms such a notion when correcting himself for claiming Catholicism to be only a memory. Though what Catholicism — or more broadly, religion — was to him remains unclear, what is certain is Fitzgerald’s shame from disassociating himself completely from it. He cannot bring himself to disavow religion. Rather, he chooses not to devote himself unto it. Thusly, his life, his literature never ascended from a sort of purgatory.

Like Mrs. Hanson of “Thank You for the Light,” Fitzgerald chose an existence where long sentences of indulging dependencies were punctuated by work. Regrettably, I believe the gritty reality of addiction, existential uncertainty, and the ever-imposing pressures to produce in America lend most to his timelessness. While countless lessons and dissertations on Fitzgerald and the American Dream fade into the overly worn, the discussion of brokenness and the interminable quest to quench one’s agonizing thirst will not tire.

With the brokenness of himself — pains which he was more open about than most of his contemporaries, including confidant Ernest Hemingway — Fitzgerald becomes relatable with the entire human race. In lieu of calling readers to rise up and assume impossible standards of perfection, I find his characters meet the readers where they truly are: incomplete, flawed, and innately longing. Here, we come once more to the matter of cisterns. These, the ancient wells humanity fashioned to feed itself, spring from the, one incontrovertible truth of *want*. Fitzgerald’s slew of characters search for significance, pleasure, and intimacy at the expense of others, marital covenants, and even their own perceptible happiness. The lengths his fictional cast go to in order to fulfill themselves underscore how potent inner desire is. Lois of “Benediction” exercises amazing mental contortions to convince herself pursuing sex with Howard is her best course of action. A young boy with the cobalt-blue eyes takes on a dissociative identity to escape religion and so seeks worldly greatness in

“Absolution.” An aging woman feigns, or, at best, half-heartedly engages in prayer after failing to feed her addiction to smoking in “Thank You for the Light.” While these moments are not the typical renderings of humanity’s prouder portraits, they are *real* portraits; they are *realistically* broken.

A striking correlation between the sense of his characters’ incompleteness and, thus, their drive to create a fixation on and pursue various cisterns can be seen in Fitzgerald himself. Greg Forter’s article “F. Scott Fitzgerald, Psychobiography, and the Fin-de-Siècle Crisis in Masculinity” touches on this. Forter gives an account for the agency of loss as an impetus for Fitzgerald’s creation. He writes:

[The] foundational role of loss in the author’s...creative life... indicates that loss was for him an originally and generative principle, the womb not merely of individual acts of expression... but of artistic identity itself. Loss is...the event that ‘started’ Fitzgerald as a writer, and from this there follows the corollary proposition that without loss there would have been, for Fitzgerald, no impulse or reason to create at all. (153)

Drawing attention to loss as an artistic *identity*, I assert that Fitzgerald assumed a certain oneness between an incompleteness, a brokenness and one’s self-perception. For Fitzgerald, according to Forter, the two constructs are inextricably linked: *self* and *brokenness*.

Fitzgerald's novels — particularly *This Side of Paradise*, *Gatsby* and *Tender Is the Night* — are clearly representative of men and women whose identities are wrapped around their painful longings. Yet, I argue, his short stories provide the best platform for Fitzgerald's discourse of cisternal longings, self-attribution to those longings, and a denial of God in their pursuit. It seems fitting that for an author like Fitzgerald with such a brilliant, albeit unfortunately short, life, his purest form of authenticity be found in his short fiction. His sincerest model is where succinctness must meet eloquence and every detail works toward the whole with a singleness of purpose. With limited space, every word carries greater weight and ought to convey a grander office. Indeed, Fitzgerald chose his short fiction to deal most closely with religion and apostasy, and some of his most viscerally saddening pieces are short stories. For such a brilliantly short life, perhaps what one can say in a single breath is the closest reflection of one's truest heart of hearts. From beginning to end, Fitzgerald — driven by the impulses of loss and cisternal brokenness — tried to understand a God he did not know, in the only way he knew how: a pen.

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