F. Scott Fitzgerald's novella *The Diamond as Big as the Ritz* focuses on commodity fetishism. The main character, John Unger, initially becomes a victim of consuming ostentatious jewelry, clothing, and amenities provided by the wealthy Washington family. However, he is eventually trapped and doomed to never leave the estate. This phenomenon is also exemplified in the way the Washington family treats their workers. The Washington family embodies the center of economics, the source of the distribution of material wealth, while their underlings—the African American slaves, the landscape designer, the architect, and the poet—are brainwashed with ideologies that keep them content in their servitude within this economic center. In this overblown fantasy of wealth, by revealing why the Walshingtons are able to control their hegemonic power, Fitzgerald exposes the transformation that distorted ideologies undergo, reinforcing the perpetuation of commodity fetishism and the desire for opulent lifestyles in society.

The Washington family withholds information about their income to maintain control over their wealth. To achieve this, they spread a capitalistic ideology.
by distributing their diamonds. This enables them to brainwash, through propagandistically educating the mass of leaders around the world with false beliefs, which would then trickle down to the lower classes. This ruling ideology dominates people into conforming to lifestyles that always safeguard the fortunes of the ruling class. When Unger and Percy arrive at the secluded chateau, Percy tells Unger that the mountain his chateau sits on top of is one giant diamond; he goes on to tell him that his family has made many attempts to thwart people, specifically the government, from finding this quasi El Dorado, as the narrator explains that:

“If his [family’s] secret should transpire there was no telling to what measures the Government might resort in order to prevent a panic, in gold as well as in jewels. They might take over the claim immediately and institute a monopoly” (8).

The Washington family and, hypothetically according to the excerpt above, the government are completely aware of the fact that the discovery of the sheer quantity of diamonds located at this mountain, dictated by the laws of supply and demand, would render the value of diamonds to become worthless, and would therefore disrupt the whole system of economics and its dependence on the market value of materials. So, to prevent this, the head family member travels to meet the heads of society outside their country to exchange their diamonds for currency, develop façade histories that would explain where the diamonds came from, promote wars which would further the need of distributing materials, and deposit their money in the “safety vaults of banks all over the world” (9). This tactic would not only keep their income a secret by hiding their money everywhere in the form of remote property, but also control the value of their diamonds.

One could argue that the ideology they employ is inherent within every family and not exclusive to their own, that it is how people come to understand why they practice the customs
of ownership. But for the Washingtons, their ideology becomes a deliberate, premeditated ploy when Norm-Fitz Washington transforms it with a systematic plan to control his wealth and workers, which is then passed on down the younger generations of Washingtons. The family’s scheme is like that of a bank, fueling the cycle of economics. It implies that they are practically investing in capitalism and are the direct cause of material wealth. Because no one outside of the family knows of their ruse, the economic gain through capitalistic means is perpetuated throughout the world.

With this perpetuation comes commodity fetishism. Some minor characters in the story think that their own well-being is somehow benefited from things that they assume to have intrinsic value. Take for instance the African American slaves. The story goes that Fitz-Norman Washington, before the accidental finding of his fortune, brought with him “two dozen of [his] most faithful blacks” (8). After realizing that he must keep the location of the mountain a secret, he brainwashes them with a pseudo proclamation that says that the North was defeated—this too exemplifies the family generating ideology for their own purposes. Later on in the story Percy and Braddock Washington show Unger around the chateau and come across the slaves’ quarters, where Braddock tells Unger that “[he] equipped every one of their rooms with a tile bath” (12). Because the family offers them luxury living, the slaves stay subservient. It is by limiting what they know that the family treats them as mindless puppets. Some of them are taught to speak English and are given specific jobs as secretaries and house servants i.e. they are born into this cycle of servitude because they are oblivious to the family’s scheme and thus fetishize the possessions at their disposal. In their minds they take a commodity, such as the ones the Washingtons offer, and give it value based on objective economic value, which is
dictated by market relations. Because the commodities are not priced by subjectivity but rather objectivity, they can be infinitely substituted for other commodities as long their contrived worth stands. Sentimental value does not exist to these characters and they, instead, sacrifice their well-being to gain satisfaction from commodities.

However, this tactic does not work on every character. Some minor characters become estranged from being owned by the Washingtons and literally lose their minds. The narrator says:

“Braddock Washington, so Percy told him, had caused to be kidnapped a landscape gardener, an architect, a designer of state settings, and a French decadent poet left over from the last century. He had put his entire force of negroes at their disposal, guaranteed to supply them with any materials that the world could offer, and left them to work out some ideas of their own. But one by one they had shown their uselessness. The decadent poet had at once begun bewailing his separation from the boulevards in spring” (16).

In other words, what Fitzgerald is trying to say is that these characters are alienated because they are immersed in an overabundance of commodities—he is also critiquing the worth of their occupations, all of which have to do with adorning commodities, which furthers the fueling of the economic cycle, but that is beside the point I wish to make. In particular, the poet, rather than fetishizing about objects, longs to be reunited with nature, or “the boulevards in spring”. It is as if Fitzgerald is begging the question: what is any object really worth when all your wants are given to you at your disposal? This fictional situation makes the reader question the value of commodities when juxtaposed with workers who are constantly overworked even when they have everything that they could possibly want.
Fitzgerald is outlining the dynamics of the flow of money in his society, and the ploys used by the hegemony to control it. Because he lived in a time of unprecedented prosperity in the United States during the 1920s, it is fitting that he would write a story about people being subsumed by commodity fetishism. He shows how ideologies can be molded into the worker’s mind to do the bidding of a family like the Washingtons. More abstractly, he warns to his readers that the control of knowledge can influence people to value objects over themselves.

Ashley Tierney

Marxism and “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz”

According to Karl Marx, commodity fetishism is defined as follows,

“There is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things … In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. … This I call the fetishism, which attaches itself to the products of labor” (Marx 321).

“The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” by Scott F. Fitzgerald conveys the Marxist idea of commodity fetishism through the bizarre interactions of the Washington family with the victims that enter into their strange, diamond-clad world.
The slaves in the story are reduced to commodities as the Washington’s strip them of human characteristics and give them a product value. First, this is done when the grandfather Mr. Washington lies to the slaves about the result of the civil war. This passage explains his trapping lie, “To make sure of this, he read them a proclamation that he had composed, which announced that General Forrest had reorganized the shattered Southern armies and defeated the North in one pitched battle. The negroes believed him implicitly” (Fitzgerald 8). By lying to the slaves about the emancipation proclamation, Mr. Washington reduces them to objects for his benefit. The slaves are forced to stay in their oppressed roles on the estate and aid the Washingtons in a lavish lifestyle for at least another generation. Second, the slaves are objectified as they are given a monetary value. When the chateaux is under attack Kismine exclaims,

“Suddenly the whole portico of the negro quarters cracked asunder, a geyser of flame shot up from under the colonnades, and great fragments of jagged marble were hurled as far as the borders of the lake. ‘There go fifty thousand dollars' worth of slaves,’ cried Kismine, ‘at prewar prices. So few Americans have any respect for property’” (Fitzgerald 21).

The slaves become commodities in the Marxist thought process because of this exchange value, which fits right in with the labor theory. In other words, the slaves are given a value based on their usefulness to other slave owners.

Next, the friends and even other members of the Washington family are made to fall into the trap of commodity fetishism. As stated in a previous passage, Karl Marx explains commodities as follows, “the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race (Marx 321). Relations and interactions between friends and the Washingtons and even the Washingtons
and themselves are live productions of the Washington’s brains. These seemingly close and even loving interactions are all a hoax thought up to appease the family’s emotional boredom. In the following passage Kismine explains how friends of the family are dealt with when it is time for them to leave the chateaux,

“In August usually – or early in September. It’s only natural for us to get all the pleasure out of them that we can first … We can’t very well imprison them like those aviators, where they’d be a continual reproach to us every day. And it’s always been made easier for Jasmine and me because father had it done sooner than we expected. In that way we avoided any farewell scene – (Fitzgerald 17-18)”.

The people are treated as toys, simply thrown out or killed when their time is up. Similarly, the Washington girls Jasmine and Kismine have an unemotional reaction to the suicides of their father, mother, and brother. The only reaction the girls give is a scream of surprise at the oncoming death of their family (Fitzgerald 24-25). After that the girls do not mourn their loss, but discuss eating out doors and entering a middle class lifestyle (Fitzgerald 25). These two occurrences further prove that the Washington’s consider people in their lives to be replaceable objects.

The only problem that arises with people being commodities in the story is with Marxist labor theory. Marx explains, “It is only by being exchanged that the products of labor acquire, as values, one uniform social status, distinct from their varied forms of existence as objects of utility (Marx 321)”. That is, these people are slaves and given a monetary value in a time period where there are no more slaves in the United States. There is not market for them. So, Marx would argue that the slaves have no monetary value because there is no market for them. They cannot be placed in any economic mode. Furthermore, the story does not define the value of
companionship between family and friends. Therefore they too cannot be placed in the economic mode.

Scott F. Fitzgerald’s “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” demonstrates Karl Marx’s idea that human relationships are objectified based upon the objects they produce and acquire in their lives. The objectification of slaves by giving them a price and keeping them from freedom holds them. They are commodities and they cannot escape. Similarly, the methods by which the Washington’s emotionally use and throw away their friends and each other even further shows this objectification. They keep people as commodities for their benefits. According to Marx, being estranged from labor causes people to not be fully human (Marx 77). This explains why the Washingtons struggle to act with remorse when they kill the people that they are close to.

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Jonathan Dees

Third Paper Assignment – “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz”

“Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.” (3.1.31) says Shakespeare in Henry IV, Part 2. While these words ring somewhat hollow when spoken by the king, or when his son later echoes this statement in his own play, Shakespeare hits on something that few people honestly consider. And that is
the troubled and empty nature of the richest peoples’ existence. While everyone can easily agree that the poorest people in society typically lead painful and wretched lives, few are willing to argue for the difficulty of a rich and privilege life. F. Scott Fitzgerald presents a family living in this exact predicament in his novella “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz”. Far removed from the real living conditions of the world, this novella presents an interesting inversion of Marx’s theory of alienation, moving the mantel of victim from the poorest workers to the riches capitalists.

The evidence to support this theory is peppered throughout the story, but only comes to light when secret of the narrative is known. When the protagonist meets the first member of the Washington family, Percy, it is said that “for some reason he kept aloof from the other boys.” (Fitzgerald 2). On the initial reading of the story, the young man’s aloofness is chalked up to social awkwardness or perhaps shyness, but once the story is over it is obvious that the boy is alienated from his fellow man because of his great wealth. While Marx argues in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* that one of the consequences of estranged labor is the “estrangement of man from man.” (77), Fitzgerald turns this on its head and has the successful capitalist estranged from his fellow capitalist because they do not reach his level of wealth.

This interesting inversion is continued in the way that the patriarch of the family, Braddock, converses with the captured curious aviators. The first telling detail is the fact that each man’s social position is made physical by their elevation; the richest man in the world is on top of a grassy hill, while the group of average treasure hunters is down in a hole. This is no accident on Fitzgerald’s part, calling to mind the famous “Pyramid of Capitalism” propaganda posters. When the tall prisoner engages Braddock in a way that implies that they have had this conversation before, Braddock is shown to have no discernible human emotions. The tall prisoner tries to appeal to the father’s sense of fairness, humanity, and compassion, all to no avail. The only emotion that does get a rise from Braddock is
stupidity, and even then it is an emotion of a businessman more than a compassionate person.

Braddock talks of how he has monetarily provided for the men, by enlarging their hole and giving them food and clothes, but he makes no mention of how he empathizes for them. Because Braddock is the second generation of this extremely wealthy family, he has been raised in a world in which people are truly commodities. To use a term from Economics, the opportunity cost of releasing the men is greater than the cost of keeping them in his private prison. Great wealth has permanently corrupted Braddock’s soul and alienated him from his fellow man, stripping him of any ability to understanding how anyone feels.

The end of the story shows two other prongs of Marx’s theory of alienation inverted in the actions of the young daughter of the family. On the instructions of her fiancée John, Kismine grabs jewels to fund the three escaped youths’ life after the leaving the château. But she ends up grabbing worthless rhinestones instead of diamonds. When questioned she replays that “I think I like these better. I’m a little tired of diamonds.” (25). These revealing words show that the young girl is alienated from the product of her labor. While she didn’t personally mine any diamonds out of the ground herself, those stones are the product of her family’s business. After spending an entire life surrounded by them, they have become just another shiny rock, with no meaning or value to her. While Marx states that the worker’s product of labor becomes “an alien object exercising power over him.” (74), the product of her family’s labor has an opposite effect in that it exercises absolutely no power over her. Kismine’s sixteen years on Earth have given her no concrete definition of money, with rhinestones and diamonds existing on the same level in her mind. The direct consequences of her warped mind showcase the third inversion of Marx’s alienation in the story, the alienation of man from his work.

When John and Kismine realize that they are poor, Kismine gingerly says “‘I love washing, I have always washed my own handkerchiefs. I’ll take in laundry and support you both.’” (26). Instead of an
intimate knowledge of the pains of production alienating her from work, Kismine’s utter ignorance alienates her. Kismine still possess the relation to her work “as an alien activity not belonging to” her (75), but it stems from the complete opposite place than it does for Marx’s hypothetical factory workers. She views the job of washer woman as an exciting and rewarding profession that will support herself and two other people. While it isn’t stated for certain, the possibility that a washer woman could make enough money for herself, let alone three people is very slim. Kismine has no ability to imagine the daily struggle that working a hard labor job will be. Her mind is such that she imagines it as a fun hobby, something she can do for an hour and then stop so she can run in a field or read poetry. Kismine has been alienated from the real conditions of being part of the workforce, not realizing that she cannot stop when she gets tired of working and that she no longer has her family’s money as a constant safety net ready to catch her should she fail.

While it is hard to make a convincing argument that the rich have it has bad as the poor in the capitalist system, their life can be shown to be not all wine and roses. Marx spent so much of his time describing the ways in which the workers are held down and abused by the capitalist system; it is easy to forget what a corrupting force vast amounts of money can be. While modern Communists tend to demonize the rich as blood thirty monsters that dance on the backs of the bruised, and this isn’t completely wrong, it is an overstatement to say that their lives are easy. A simple twist of fate and chance of birth make the capitalist capitalist as haphazardly as it makes the workers workers. So instead of a revolution that kills all of the rich so the poor can rise up, a future should be envisioned in which everyone exists on the same level because of their shared humanity.
Commodity of Friendship

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Diamond as Big as The Ritz” reveals many of the problems of capitalism. The Washington family exemplifies the extreme bourgeois power that Karl Marx spoke against. Their immense riches give them the power to purchase almost any commodity imaginable, and Mr. Braddock uses this power to provide friendship for his children. When Percy Washington brings John T. Unger to the property in Montana, John becomes a commodity that Braddock Washington purchased to fetishize friendship. However, as Kismine socializes with John, they are unable to use him as a commodity and decide to escape their capitalist society.

Percy Washington ships John T. Unger like a common good to Montana. He is blindfolded, given no information, and driven across the country like any purchased good. Braddock Washington pays these expenses because of the use-value in John’s friendship. Once he is exchanged and brought to Montana, John plays golf and goes hunting with Braddock and Percy everyday. After seeing Braddock’s prisoners, John allows the Washington’s beat him in these tasks. He is fetishized for a friend, but a non-commodity friend would be given the freedom to win or lose freely.

Kismine’s friendship with John transitions from a commodity friendship to a true social friendship as they spend the summer together. They even begin to discuss absurd ideas in this society.
such as marriage. As they discuss marriage, Kismine accidentally tells John that they have not only had guests in the past, but that they “removed” (Fitzgerald 17). Her euphemism demonstrates how these people were commodities, but her grief reveals how she began to see them as more than commodities. John, seeking the full truth, asks “‘Do you mean to say that your father had them murdered before they left?” (Fitzgerald 17). Kismine simply nods and reveals that they usually complete the task in August or September because “‘It’s only natural for us to get all the pleasure out of them that we can first.’” Here, capitalism’s horrors are exposed. When people can be purchased as goods, they become products that must be used to the maximum efficiency before being trashed.

As John realizes that he is a commodity, he begins to challenge Kismine accusing her of having an “affair with a fellow that you know isn’t much better than corpse.” Here Kismine becomes indignant protesting “You’re not a corpse! I won’t have you saying that I kissed corpse!” Her protest reveals that she no longer sees John as a commodity and resents the possibility that he is a commodity.

The airplane attacks provide the perfect opportunity for John and Kismine to escape the footholds of extreme capitalism. As Kismine consents to leave with John she says that they’ll be like the people in her books “‘Free and poor! What fun!’” (Fitzgerald 21). Her exclamation shows her human desire to be free. John’s response echoes Marx’s idea that freedom is above wealth saying, “‘It’s impossible to be both together’” (Fitzgerald 21). Here they are both rejecting the capitalist need for wealth and material goods.

The next morning, Kismine, Jasmine, and John realize that they no longer have any diamonds. Kismine accidentally took rhinestones before the property was destroyed. Instead of panicking over the loss of their wealth, Kismine says “I think I like these better. I’m a little tired of diamonds” (Fitzgerald 25). She’s rejecting capitalist wealth for the freedom of their new society. As they discuss their new life, they reflect Marx’s idea that man is a natural producer because Kismine and Jasmine both immediately begin to discuss the work they may do. They show interest in washing, which shows that they will
naturally produce for the benefit of the society without a social hierarchy. This new society is a reflection of the freedom Marx described.

When Braddock Washington brings John T. Unger into Montana, he plans to use him as a commodity. However, this attempt to fetishize friendship is broken down when Kismine begins to view John as a human being worthy of love. Since she cannot love John in this capitalist world, they are forced to escape and begin a new society. Fitzgerald’s “Diamond as Big as the Ritz” shows the dangers of making humans commodities and how mankind is a natural social producer.