When asked by her English Studies (ENG 30001) professor Dr. Jeannette E. Riley to analyze a specific text using a Marxist critical approach, Kelly Lohman chose F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz." In this essay, Lohman explores the socioeconomic injustices that existed between the bourgeois upper-class and the poverty-stricken lower class of the American 1920's. She critiques the symbolic images of wealth and power that continually surface in the story's plot, and ultimately concludes that the "commodification of humanity" has disastrous, dehumanizing effects.

When examined through a Marxist and materialist perspective, F. Scott Fitzgerald's short story "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" depicts the destructive nature of the indulgent 1920's American socioeconomic structure. While classism shapes Fitzgerald's text, the story objectively critiques such a structure, revealing its detriment to the human spirit. For instance, Critic H. Alan Wycherley believes that the socioeconomic structure of the 1920's directly influenced all of Fitzgerald's writings, and that in this story, "once again appears the theme of the attractions of wealth, here carried to the level of science fiction" (262). Although Fitzgerald did not directly associate himself with Marxism, he seems to have intentionally crafted "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" to challenge the class struggle and commodification that plagued the 1920's. The characters' motivation for the power implied within wealth creates a microcosm within the story, representing the 1920's socioeconomic structure as a whole. Greed not only creates the classes within the story, but also dehumanizes the characters, causing them to judge each other solely on economic worth. The story's linguistic devices display this dehumanization and show the undeniable link between socioeconomic conditions and human consciousness.

Characterization is asserted as the story's most striking element, emphasizing the dehumanization of individuals through their positioning within a socioeconomic structure. As the story progresses, the characters develop into little more than representations of their social class. The characters who belong to the bourgeoisie shamelessly flaunt their wealth, while the proletariat characters cater to the upper class's every whim, in pathetic hope of one day achieving a similar status. Such is the case with the story's main character, John T. Unger, a member of the proletariat who visits the estate of the Washington's, a wealthy family who represent the bourgeoisie. In contrast, John originates from the town of Hades, perhaps symbolizing the hellishness of his proletariat lifestyle. Fitzgerald characterizes John as naïve and simple-minded, possessing a great admiration for the wealth he will never possess. John abides by the idea that, "The richer a fella is, the better I like him," and in turn, devalues himself for his own shameful proletariat status (77). John's character shows how the socioeconomic structure breeds discontent within individuals of lower classes. His attitude toward the bourgeoisie expresses paradox because he finds both comfort and frustration within the 1920's socioeconomic structure. Because of ideas that the bourgeoisie has imposed upon him, John admires his oppressors, thus devaluing his own life.

Also, John's constant hope of attaining the bourgeoisie's wealth causes him to waste his youth, always hoping to achieve a higher status. He simply cannot find contentment in his current economic situation. According to the story's narrator it is because of John's, "...felicity as well as insufficiency that he can never live in the present but must always be measuring up the day against his own radiantly imagined future" (90). Thus, John continues to feebly adhere to the bourgeoisie's commands, hoping that his devotion to them will earn him a place within their elite ranks. As displayed through John's example, the proletariat as a whole can never appreciate the present because of their discontent with their economic situation.

Such discontent explains why the proletariat continue to admire those who oppress them. In essence, the higher classes represent the only goal for
which John and the rest of the proletariat have. Paradoxically, the bourgeoisie give proletarian existence a false purpose through devaluation. Ultimately, John’s admiration for those who keep him subservient displays the Marxist belief in the presence of a false consciousness among society’s lower classes. John possesses the misinformed belief that he actually has a chance to rise above his current status. Overall, John’s character shows how socioeconomic structure has a direct influence upon the beliefs and actions of the proletariat masses.

Less obviously, socioeconomic conditions have an equally detrimental effect upon the consciousness of the bourgeoisie. The character of Percy Washington best displays how the warped consciousness of the bourgeoisie keeps the proletariat in submission. Percy’s wealth prompts him to view all individuals, including John, according to how they can further his already excessive wealth. Fitzgerald characterizes Percy as an arrogant and cunning individual who alienates others on the basis of their lack of wealth. Percy takes great pleasure in his own alienation, “keeping aloof from the other boys at his school” and being “entirely uncommunicative concerning his home or his family” (77). Percy’s bourgeois status isolates him from his peers because he views himself as superior to them. He possesses the standard bourgeoisie belief that the individuals of the proletariat exist solely for his benefit, and he treats them in any manner he pleases. Thus, Percy’s character shows the tension between the commodification of humanity and the alienation that it creates.

When viewed through a Marxist perspective, Percy embodies the beliefs of his class as a whole, in that the preservation of his wealth assumes top priority within his consciousness. He stops at nothing to protect his family’s estate, even if it means sacrificing a proletariat life. He simplistically believes that the ends of his destructive efforts to achieve wealth will justify his means. Percy supports his father’s belief that “Cruelty doesn’t exist where self-preservation is involved,” displaying how his treatment of the proletariat depends only upon how they can enhance or diminish his wealth (95). Percy’s beliefs perfectly illustrate the Marxist principle that classism determines consciousness and causes individuals to be viewed as commodities. Also, Percy’s suicide at the story’s end displays the Marxist belief that commodification of human lives prompts the human spirit to self-destruction.

Imagery within Fitzgerald’s story also displays the detriment of class struggle to the human spirit. The detail and extravagance depicted within certain images in the story represents how the bourgeoisie’s greed keeps the proletariat in constant subservience. Certain overpowering images of wealth and power also assert how material possessions assume a greater value to the characters than human life. For example, the image of the Washington’s’ prized diamond becomes the story’s unifying element, tying together the story’s themes of commodification and class struggle. The narrator describes the diamond as being grossly oversized, which displays the excessive enormity of the Washington’s and the bourgeoisie’s wealth. The diamond takes on grand proportions, and as Percy proudly describes, “The mountain was a diamond – it was literally nothing else but solid diamond” (87). This image becomes the story’s key symbol for the bourgeoisie’s intimidating wealth. Each of the story’s characters, bourgeoisie and proletariat alike, covet the diamond’s priceless extravagance. For members of the lower classes, the diamond looms as a false symbol of the ostentatious wealth that they hope to eventually achieve. For the bourgeoisie, the diamond represents the immensity of the power which they wield over the proletariat. The socioeconomic structure within the story simply prevents the proletariat from ever achieving the wealth that the diamond represents. The diamond, and all other riches, always loom large and visible in the distance, but they will forever remain just out of reach for the proletariat, reinforcing the idea of a false consciousness.

Abiding by the Marxist ideas concerning the corruptive nature of wealth, the diamond’s excessive size eventually prevents the Washington’s from hiding it any longer, and they decide that they must destroy it. However, because they know that they cannot retain their socioeconomic status without the diamond’s presence, they decide to commit a collective suicide during the simultaneous destruction of their precious jewel. Ironically, the Washington’s’ most valuable possession ends up “possessing” them, and the diamond’s destruction dictates their own fates. Their suicides represent a useless attempt to gain control over the wealth that has controlled them for so long. Moreover, their suicides also display the Marxist idea that even the bourgeoisie are not free from the trappings of an oppressive socioeconomic structure. In keeping with Marxist ideals, the diamond’s destruction at the story’s end suggests that the capitalist system itself will eventually self-destruct. The destruction of the story’s most powerful image represents how the bourgeoisie will eventually become too powerful for its own good and how power will inevitably turn
against all who possess it.

Irony is a final aspect of the story that asserts Fitzgerald’s idea that the 1920’s socioeconomic structure deprived the human spirit. Irony lies within the bourgeoisie’s inability to appreciate their economic situation, and their constant fear of the destruction of their wealth and power. The Washingtons are even willing to “sacrifice some of their best friends” in order to keep their riches a secret (101). Their wealth isolates them from the rest of society because of the paranoia that their diamond creates for them. The Washingtons’ need for wealth eventually overshadows their need for affection from other human beings. Yet, even when they acquire more wealth than any other member of their community, they still cannot live in peace because they must devote their lives to protecting their diamond. The Washingtons’ situation can be viewed as ironic because it shows how spiritual emptiness festered within the economic goals of the 1920’s. Every character in the story becomes a slave to the wealth that is supposed to bring him or her ultimate freedom and happiness. The irony of the bourgeoisie’s unhappiness becomes especially evident at the story’s end when Percy’s father tries to bribe God with the diamond to satisfy his own selfish wish to remain a part of the bourgeoisie. With his arms outstretched toward the heavens, he begs that “matters should be as they were yesterday at this hour and that they should so remain” (111). These pleas are ironic because they highlight the degradation of the human spirit that resulted from the greed-ridden 1920’s socioeconomic structure. Even the Washington’s, powerful members of the bourgeoisie, cannot exist without fearing their economic future. At the story’s end, desperation and fear reduces Percy’s father to little more than a “magnificently mad” individual (110). This irony displays the Marxist belief that class struggles lead to a destruction of the human spirit, even if one does indeed achieve their desired status.

“The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” reveals much about the hidden trappings within the 1920’s socioeconomic structure. Fitzgerald’s short story shows how external circumstances can gradually work their way into the human spirit, and the diamond represents the fragility of even the most well established wealth. Fitzgerald’s writing itself, as well as the issues his story tackles, show how a socioeconomic structure may often discreetly influence personal beliefs. His stories also assert the Marxist belief that class struggle dilutes the souls of both those who possess power and those who strive for that power. However, such beliefs should not only be applied to Fitzgerald’s story or even the time period in which it was written. Fitzgerald’s story prompts readers to compare the 1920’s socioeconomic structure to the current structure of American society. It remains to be seen whether or not the current socioeconomic system will collapse in a similar manner as the system in Fitzgerald’s story. As displayed within Fitzgerald’s story, this fate lies within whether or not human beings continue to choose to exploit each other for wealth and place faith within the fragility of material possessions.

Works Cited
