

**“I’m running this shop’: Reversed Gender Roles and Prostitution in Fitzgerald’s ‘Head and Shoulders.’”** Paper presented at “The American Short Story: An Expansion of the Genre,” an **American Literature Association (ALA)** symposium, sponsored by the **Society for the Study of the American Short Story (SSASS)**, in Savannah, GA. Oct. 2016.

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**“I’m running this shop”:**

**Reversed Gender Roles and Prostitution in Fitzgerald’s “Head and Shoulders”**

In June of 1919, Zelda Sayre broke off her engagement to F. Scott Fitzgerald, but that September, when Fitzgerald found that out that his manuscript, “The Romantic Egotist” (which we know as the novel *This Side of Paradise*) had been accepted for publication, he was filled with new confidence and vitality. Warned by Scribner’s that the novel would not be released until the following spring and determined to earn money quickly and win back Zelda’s hand, Fitzgerald delved back into the magazine fiction market. Fitzgerald had published a few stories in the intellectual magazine *The Smart Set*, but the editors refused to pay him more than forty dollars per story (Piper 64). That October, he composed a short story based on the life of Harvard prodigy William James Sidis, titled simply “The Prodigy” (*Brucoli Before Gatsby* 129), but Fitzgerald played with the true story, introducing a free-spirited chorus girl into the life of the titular prodigy and eventually selling the story to *The Saturday Evening Post* for four hundred dollars, ten times as much money as he had ever made on a story before. The *Post* editors retitled the story “Head and Shoulders,” Fitzgerald’s first story to be published in *The Saturday Evening Post* or any other “slickie” magazine, a mainstream magazine carrying an immense circulation and popularity, nicknamed after the slick paper on which it was printed (Piper 65-66).

The story’s publication in the February 21, 1920 issue of *The Saturday Evening Post* initiated Fitzgerald’s career in popular magazine fiction as well as introducing him to

Hollywood. In March, the movie rights to the story were sold to Metro for \$2,500, which led to the sale of the film rights for three other *Post* stories to three other studios for another \$4,500. That's when Zelda gave in. The engagement was announced on March 20. *This Side of Paradise* was released on March 26. And Zelda and F. Scott were married on April 3 (Piper 71).

Although the publication of "Head and Shoulders" formed a significant milestone in Fitzgerald's life and career (Piper), the story has received little attention from scholars.

The story focuses on the character Horace Tarbox, an intellectual prodigy who enters the Master of Arts program at Yale at the age of seventeen. Horace's life changes forever when a nineteen-year-old musical comedy dancer named Marcia Meadow knocks on the door of his study. Reluctantly but inevitably, Horace falls for Marcia. He leaves Yale, marries Marcia, and becomes a clerk with a South American export company. Her earnings on stage, coupled with his salary, allow them to survive. Referring to his intellectual capabilities and her graceful body respectively, they name themselves "Head and Shoulders."

When Marcia becomes pregnant, however, she is forced to stop dancing, and Horace is forced to find a better-paying job. Having recently renewed his hobby as a gymnast, Horace finds fame and financial success as a trapeze artist. Meanwhile, Marcia fills her idle hours at home by writing about her life. Her leisurely writings become a manuscript, which is eventually published, and Marcia is thrust into the literary world. At the close of the story, Marcia has transformed from a performer using her body to an intellectual revered for her mind, successful in the field to which Horace had once aspired. Meanwhile, Horace has transformed from an intellectual prodigy to a circus performer. The magnitude of their role reversal is made explicit in a newspaper article featuring Marcia. Having learned of their joke nickname of "Head and Shoulders," the reporter assumes Marcia is the Head or intellect and Horace is the Shoulders or

body. The final lines of the story display Horace's regret at having succumbed to life and love.

The role reversal of *Head and Shoulders* signifies the reversal of typical gender roles in the relationship between Horace and Marcia, finally signifying the complete emasculation, disempowerment, and objectification of Horace. Ultimately, he becomes nothing more than an object, using his body to perform for money, a metaphorical prostitute, just as F. Scott Fitzgerald felt he was prostituting himself in his magazine fiction in order to earn the necessary money to survive and marry Zelda Sayre. Fitzgerald's own struggles with the literary world influence this story in which financial necessity reduces genius to prostitution.

Fitzgerald's interest in the mutability of typical gender roles manifests itself throughout his works, but almost no literary critics have deeply explored its appearance in the short story "Head and Shoulders," a story in which Fitzgerald most avidly pursues these notions. Furthermore, none of them explore the ways in which Horace eventually becomes objectified and commodified. Fitzgerald wrote the story while trying to renew his engagement to Zelda, but such a renewal seemed certain because of the acceptance of *This Side of Paradise* for publication. For this reason, this story almost certainly reflects Fitzgerald's own notions concerning not only his work as a writer of magazine fiction but also his opinions on gender roles and the possibility of his upcoming marriage. However, at the close of the story, Fitzgerald suddenly regrets this investigation into these atypical gender roles, transforming such a relationship into a farce in order to meet the conservative standards of his magazine audience.

For the sake of time, I'll skip over what I mean by "typical or atypical gender roles." My paper relies on magazine advertisements from the time, photos from Fitzgerald's life, and most importantly on Marilyn French's book *Shakespeare's Division of Experience*, especially the notions of "inlaw and outlaw femininity." Suffice it to say that the characters of Marcia and

Horace in “Head and Shoulders” represent a significant departure if not altogether reversal of the typical gender roles suggested by such advertisements, photographs, and other works.

Horace begins the story as a man of intellect and intellect only, for his incredible intelligence is the only outstanding feature of his character. He has almost no physical presence whatsoever and completely embodies the head, the intellect, reason, rationality: “When he talked you forgot he had a body at all. It was like hearing a phonograph record by a singer who had been dead a long time” (91). While Horace’s identification with the head is certainly apt considering his intellectual capabilities, the word contains other connotations that reinforce his eventual emasculation. Because typical gender roles associate the masculine with reason and rationality, to be masculine is to be involved in the world of the mind and thus interested in the head rather than the body. Furthermore, in the couple’s nickname of “Head and Shoulders,” the head is singular while the shoulders are plural, perhaps reflecting the masculine principle’s focus on the individual and the feminine principle’s focus on the community. When Horace loses the nickname of “Head,” he must admit that he has entered the world of the physical, the world of the feminine (French).

The word “head” is, of course, also suggestive of the phallus, a connotation that is significant considering the fact that this title is eventually taken from Horace and bestowed upon Marcia, metaphorically castrating Horace and giving Marcia the dominant power of the masculine. Furthermore, “head” also connotes the top of the body and a leader or ruler. While maintaining his obsession with academics and avoiding matrimony, Horace retains at least a limited agency. However, once he begins his relationship with Marcia, she eventually takes the title of “Head” and rules the relationship. The final loss of this title reiterates his total loss of agency and masculinity (Harper).

In a sharp contrast to Horace, Marcia is overwhelming and dominant. The fact that Marcia is the one who originates their nickname of Head and Shoulders is worth noting, another sign of her control of the relationship and her ability to label and thus define both herself and her husband: “‘We’ll call ourselves Head and Shoulders, dear...and the shoulders’ll have to keep shaking a little longer until the old head gets started’” (110). This line provides the specific reference to the practical applications of the shoulders. They are made to shake, an action that inevitably shakes the breasts as well, a fact that Horace notices. After first seeing her dance, he says, “The people behind me were making remarks about your bosom” (100), causing Marcia to blush. Ultimately her role as a dancer is to entertain, to perform, to sell sex and earn income, at least until “the old head gets started,” a comment that implies both Horace’s current financial ineffectiveness and images of male impotence.

Marcia’s powerful physical presence and sexuality perfectly befit the label of “Shoulders,” for Marcia is just as engrossed in the world of the physical as Horace is immersed in the world of the mental. Introducing the character, Fitzgerald observes that Marcia is blond and that she does not wear makeup at noon: “Outside of that she was no better than most women” (89). Just as Horace is exceptional only in his intellect (95), Marcia is exceptional only in her beauty. While the head is the center of reason, rationality, and masculinity, the shoulders suggest physicality and femininity. Furthermore, they connote physical labor and thus a kind of inferiority in relation to the head. Marcia’s eventual adoption of “Head” in place of “Shoulders” reflects her ultimate dominance of the marriage and her entry into the realm of the masculine (French).

Earlier in the story, Horace expresses his opinion concerning women and marriage quite clearly: “Women brought laundry and took your seat in the street-car and married you later on

when you were old enough to know fetters” (90). Before meeting Marcia, then, Horace considers women as servants, annoyances, and finally as prisons. This concern over marriage and the limitations that accompany matrimony appears toward the close of the story when Horace ponders the unexpected path life has forced him down: “He had meant to write a series of books, to popularize the new realism.... But life hadn’t come that way. Life took hold of people and forced them into flying rings” (119-20). Although Horace is referring to his new career as a trapeze artist, the use of the word “rings,” connotes not only the ring of the circus and the rings of a gymnast but also wedding rings, all of which serve as confinements for Horace, although he does not consciously resent the marriage until the final line of the story. Indeed, it’s worth noting that the love in this relationship is genuine. Marcia’s dominance is never malevolent or ill-intentioned. Horace submits willingly and only resents his new role at the very end of the story.

Fitzgerald delineates the dichotomy of their marriage quite clearly: “Their minds moved in different spheres. Marcia acted as a practical factotum, and Horace lived either in his own world of abstract ideas or in a sort of triumphantly earthy worship and adoration of his wife. She was a continual source of astonishment to him” (111). Although this description seems to suggest the perfect harmony of these two characters, Fitzgerald’s depiction actually underscores Horace’s own diminutive role in the marriage. Marcia is a “practical factotum,” echoing the pragmatist philosophy Horace once so ardently studied. Instead, the “worship and adoration of his wife” is his new area of focus. While Marcia exists in the real world, Horace is relegated to his own abstractions, with his only alternative being the adulation of Marcia, whose name echoes that of Mars, the Roman deity.

Contrary to conventional gender roles, Marcia is the breadwinner, earning more money than Horace, and Horace’s inability to provide for his family is one factor that leads to his

metaphorical prostitution. Fitzgerald suddenly reveals that Marcia is pregnant and that the couple needs more money. The necessity for an increased income is made quite apparent, literally listed out by the protagonist of the story. In response to this need, Marcia replies, “It’s up to the old head now. Shoulders is out of business” (115).

Because of her pregnancy, Marcia is confined to idle hours spent at home while Horace must look for a better paying job, ultimately becoming a trapeze artist. Marcia eventually fills her time by writing and publishing a serialized novel about her own life, succeeding where Horace could not, composing a commercially and critically successful novel in the realist genre. The success of this work is the final shift in the couple’s relationship and stabilizes Marcia’s dominance of the marriage. Now earning three hundred dollars per installment of her work, published serially in *Jordan’s Magazine* and to be published in book form soon, Marcia is once more the breadwinner of the family and publicly revered as a fresh and impressive literary talent.

The final and most explicit sign of their total reversal of roles appears in the way in which these two characters are treated by the press. Early in his academic career, Horace is the subject of articles and press clippings, and when Horace leaves Yale to marry Marcia, Horace remains the center of attention: “Horace Tarbox, who at fourteen had been played up in the Sunday magazines sections of metropolitan newspapers, was throwing over his career, his chance of being a world authority on American philosophy, by marrying a chorus-girl—they made Marcia a chorus girl. But like all modern stories it was a four-and-a-half-day wonder” (109). Ultimately, those who discuss the supposed scandal do not even allow Marcia a name. As the narrator notes, Marcia is reduced to just an anonymous chorus girl while the concern is focused upon the fact that Horace is giving up his academic career. The closing line of these observations also hints at Fitzgerald’s resentment toward the media, specifically the very same

magazines and newspapers he mentions that once “played up” Horace at the age of fourteen. No stories in such magazines, not even Horace’s and not even Fitzgerald’s, will ever really last.

Instead, they are mere sensation and entertainment.

In contrast to their earlier mention in the press, the closing scene of the story focuses on a newspaper clipping that places Marcia in the spotlight but then provides a bit of background concerning Horace, reducing him and making their role reversal painfully explicit:

...Horace Tarbox, who every evening delights children at the Hippodrome with his wondrous flying-ring performances.... [T]he young couple have dubbed themselves Head and Shoulders, referring doubtless to the fact that Mrs. Tarbox supplies the literary and mental qualities, while the supple and agile shoulders of her husband contribute their share to the family fortunes. Mrs. Tarbox seems to merit that much-abused title—“prodigy.” (123)

From an intellectual prodigy, Horace has been reduced to an entertainer who “delights children.” Furthermore, while Marcia provides intellectual talent, Horace’s shoulders—and not Horace himself—also “contribute their share.” Not only is the clipping a bit condescending toward a former Yale and Princeton prodigy, belittling Horace’s own financial contributions, but it objectifies Horace, reducing him to mere “supple and agile shoulders,” before quickly turning back to focus once more on Marcia, the new prodigy of the story.

Fitzgerald evinces Marcia’s domination of the relationship by revealing her domination of almost every conversation between the couple. At one point, Marcia complains that Horace spends too much time reading about economics. When Horace claims that he has to do such reading, she interrupts once more: “No, you haven’t dear. I guess I’m running this shop for the present, and I won’t let my fella ruin his health and eyes. You got to get some exercise” (112). It’s worth noting that this conversation is the catalyst for Horace’s return to his hobby as a gymnast, which, in turn, leads to his becoming an objectified circus performer.

The commercial innuendos continue beyond Marcia’s labeling of the marriage as a shop,

innuendos that conflate both Marcia's dancing and Horace's acrobatics with prostitution. Already reduced in many ways, Horace finally becomes completely and explicitly objectified, transformed into a mere commodity: "[O]n the succeeding Saturday Horace Tarbox's torso made its first professional appearance in a gymnastic exhibition at the Coleman Street Gardens" (116). Horace's torso, not Horace, is the subject of the sentence, and if there was any room for doubt concerning the author's intent, Fitzgerald even employs the word "its" rather than "his," reducing Horace to the level of a mere object. Alice Hall Petry considers Horace's objectification, noting the relationship between the reduction of Horace and the increase of his success: "Horace is a fabulous success, popularly and financially, but he is simultaneously an increasingly embittered failure...a performer, little better than a well-paid clown" (18-19).

The first meeting of Horace and Marcia is the turning point of the story, the beginning of Horace's decline, and the language even this early in the story is filled with notions of commerce and commodification: "And then, just as nonchalantly as though Horace Tarbox had been Mr. Beef the butcher or Mr. Hat the haberdasher, life reached in, seized him, handled him, stretched him, and unrolled him like a piece of Irish lace on a Saturday-afternoon bargain-counter" (88). Not only has life taken Horace where he least expected to go, but it has literally transformed him into a commodity. He sells his body nightly on the trapeze, and he has become like a slab of beef or a fancy hat to be bought, used, and discarded.

In fact, Horace's transformation and prostitution in the text could very well be seen as Fitzgerald's own frustrations. In order to survive, Fitzgerald had to write short stories for magazines. However, the best-paying magazines were the most popular magazines, but such magazines were only popular because they maintained conservative values, rarely the best environment for interesting literature. *The Saturday Evening Post* was the most popular and thus

the most conservative of the slickies. Henry Dan Piper explains that “more than any other magazine of the era, the *Post* served as the spokesman for the typical American middle-class mind” (79). Meanwhile, Bryant Magnum refers to the *Post* as “a magazine which paid its contributors well and accurately mirrored popular American reading tastes (29). And Andrew Hook notes that Fitzgerald’s “short stories were written for the magazine market—hence they had to be tailored to meet the demands of that market” (27). Despite the limitations imposed upon him by the magazine market, Fitzgerald was in desperate need of money and thus had little choice but to compromise his artistic abilities to survive financially, for the popular magazine market desired light entertainment rather than careful and complex craft (Piper 71).

Bryant Magnum’s study of Fitzgerald’s finances reveals the significance of his income from magazine fiction: Fitzgerald earned more from his magazine stories than he earned from his novels and movie rights combined, so he could not forfeit such an income solely because it forced him to compose works he considered inferior. The magazine fiction market was important to Fitzgerald not only economically, however. It formed the foundation of his popularity and fame, a notion also incredibly important to Fitzgerald. According to Matthey J. Brucoli, “More people read Fitzgerald in a single issue of the *Post* than read all of his novels during his lifetime” (*Before Gatsby* xx).

However, he was still constantly frustrated with his experiences as a magazine author, comparing it to his earlier experiences working for an advertising agency. Fitzgerald referred to his work for the *Post* as trash in a letter to H.L. Mencken on May 4, 1925 (Brucoli *Before Gatsby* xv), and later used the same term to categorize “Head and Shoulders” specifically (Brucoli *Before Gatsby* 129).

The story represents a careful exploration of reversed gender roles, but such a story

surely would not match with the *Post*'s audience. Because of his reading audience, Fitzgerald probably felt the need to transform this investigation into a farce. While the relationship remains interesting, Horace ultimately regrets meeting Marcia after she first raps at the door to his study, lamenting at the story's close: "About raps. Don't answer them! Let them alone—have a padded door" (123). At the last moment, Horace realizes that he has given up his own dreams of intellectual achievement, has wasted his own prodigious abilities, and has become a circus performer, a metaphorical prostitute. While the reader can interpret this conclusion as Fitzgerald's own frustrations with the magazine market, the conclusion seems too abrupt, too sudden, even for a so-called "trick ending." Desperate to revise *This Side of Paradise* until it would be accepted for publication, Fitzgerald had tacked on the closing scene in which Amory Blaine finally approaches Princeton (282). Fitzgerald's last-minute revision of a short story already longer than the usual (*Brucoli Before Gatsby* xvi) in order to make it acceptable for popular magazines seems just as possible and just as probable.

Let me be clear: there is nothing in this story or in my interpretation of this story to suggest that the love and affection between Horace and Marcia is ever disingenuous. They both seem to truly care about each other's well-being, their marriage, and their child. Fitzgerald depicts Marcia as in control but not controlling, dominant but not domineering. She always seems to have the best intentions, never malevolent or manipulative. This story could've been a story about female empowerment or a celebration of a successful marriage using unconventional gender roles. Instead, Fitzgerald shies away from that at the very close of the story, turning it into a cautionary tale for men about the dangers of women, marriage, love, and sex.

Ultimately, Fitzgerald's own sense of prostituting his fiction is undeniable. His short stories were primarily a source of income in order to survive and to support his career as a

novelist. In reference to his short story writing, Fitzgerald makes these feelings quite clear in a letter to Maxwell Perkins dated January 10, 1920: “I want to start it [a second novel] but I don’t want to get broke in the middle + start in and have to write short stories again—because I don’t enjoy it + just do it for money” (Turnbull 106-107). Even more notorious and more explicit concerning Fitzgerald’s own sense of prostitution is his September 9, 1929 letter to Ernest Hemingway. Mentioning his pay for short stories to *The Post*, Fitzgerald writes, “Here’s a last flicker of the old cheap pride: the *Post* now pays the old whore \$4000 a screw” (Turnbull 307).

Despite Fitzgerald’s own misgivings concerning his short fiction, such stories were places in which he could explore notions for future novels or where he could reexamine concepts from old novels in new ways. They reveal his own insecurities and his own interests despite the restraint of the magazine fiction market. Alice Hall Petry declares that “Head and Shoulders” is “one of the most meaningful and revealing stories he ever wrote—even though it is doubtful that Fitzgerald recognized the fears and problems with which it deals” (21). Ultimately, it reveals Fitzgerald’s own explorations of a reversal of typical gender roles, signified by the reversal of “Head” and “Shoulders” undergone by Marcia and Horace. Because of this role reversal, Horace becomes emasculated and eventually becomes a metaphorical prostitute, reflecting Fitzgerald’s own concerns over his upcoming marriage and his career in magazine fiction. For Fitzgerald, it was a complicated relationship in which he sold himself to earn the stability necessary to be with Zelda, a conflation of love, sex, money, and literature, and this story was his attempt to explore the ways in which marriage and financial necessity can create a complete reversal of gender roles and reduce an intellectual prodigy to a disempowered prostitute. Thank you.

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