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Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and “Thank You for the Light”

James L. W. West III

The publication of new writing by F. Scott Fitzgerald is always an occasion for commentary and interpretation. The most recent piece of unpublished fiction to appear from Fitzgerald’s hand is “Thank You for the Light,” a fifteen-hundred-word vignette that was published for the first time in the 6 August 2012 issue of the *New Yorker*. (The story appeared simultaneously in the online edition of the magazine at www.newyorker.com and can now be purchased as a Kindle edition for ninety-nine cents.) In the paragraphs below I will supply some background about Fitzgerald’s story and offer a few possibilities for its interpretation, including the suggestion that Fitzgerald intended “Thank You for the Light” as an answer of sorts to Ernest Hemingway’s “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” (1933).

Fitzgerald wrote “Thank You for the Light” in the late spring of 1936, one of the most difficult periods of his life. He composed the story in May or early June of that year, about two months after the last of his Crack-Up essays, “Handle with Care,” had appeared in the April 1936 issue of *Esquire*. He was living in Baltimore and was trying, without much success, to write short fiction for the *Saturday Evening Post* and other mass-circulation magazines. Fitzgerald was heavily in debt to his publisher, Charles Scribner’s Sons, and to his literary agent, Harold Ober. His fund of fictional material was drying up, his health was shaky, and his spirits were low.

Fitzgerald sent “Thank You for the Light” to Ober on 19 June, with this 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” (qtd. in West 495).¹ Ober took Fitzgerald’s suggestion and submitted the manuscript

to the *New Yorker*. In a letter dated 25 June, he reported to Fitzgerald that the magazine had the story and would “decide about it soon” (Brucoli 274). A week later, on 2 July, Ober wrote Fitzgerald to tell him that the story had been turned down. Ober had his secretary type the rejection note from the *New Yorker* into the letter. It read as follows: “We’re afraid that this Fitzgerald story is altogether out of the question. It seems to us so curious and so unlike the kind of thing we associate with him and really too fantastic. We would give a lot, of course, to have a Scott Fitzgerald story and we hope that you will send us something that seems more suitable. Thank you, anyhow, for letting us see this” (Brucoli 275).² In the weeks that followed, Ober sent “Thank You for the Light” to at least four other magazines—*College Humor*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Vogue*—but without success. Thereafter the story went into the unsold file. The rejection letters from the other magazines do not appear to have survived.

Certainly the *New Yorker* was correct: “Thank You for the Light” was (and still is) quite unlike most of the short fiction for which Fitzgerald is known. It does not concern his typical heroine—the beautiful, spoiled, and willful young woman who at the end of the narrative, in a final suspiration, succumbs to romance and probable marriage. The protagonist here, a Mrs. Hanson, is “a pretty, somewhat faded woman of forty, who sold corsets and girdles, traveling out of Chicago.” Mrs. Hanson is alone. She is a widow and a workingwoman; she has no family to write letters to and appears to have no close friends.

“Thank You for the Light” is one of several Chekhovian vignettes that Fitzgerald wrote during the 1930s. He seems to have been deliberately teaching himself to write in this form, partly for commercial reasons and partly to introduce a new tightness and understatement to his fiction. “Thank You for the Light,” suggestive and elliptical, is quite different from the loose-jointed, episodic tales of young love, usually about eight thousand words in length, that Fitzgerald had turned out so reliably for the *Post* during the 1920s and early 1930s. It resembles such other late Fitzgerald stories as “Three Acts of Music” (1936), “The Long Way Out” (1937), and “The Lost Decade” (1939), all published in *Esquire*. It belongs also with “Dearly Beloved,” a story written early in 1940 that did not sell during Fitzgerald’s lifetime and was not published until 1969, when it appeared in the *Fitzgerald/Hemingway Annual* for that year.³

“Thank You for the Light” is about smoking. One of the few pleasures that Mrs. Hanson allows herself during her workday is an occasional cigarette in a quiet place. She has to be careful about where she smokes. In 1936 it was still not entirely proper for a woman to be seen smoking in public, and many businesses forbade smoking on their premises. The ending of the story, in which

Mrs. Hanson receives a light for her cigarette in the sanctuary of a Catholic cathedral, could have been perceived by Catholic readers as faintly irreligious and possibly even blasphemous. This might help to explain why, in 1936, the story was rejected by all five magazines to which it was sent.

The typescript of “Thank You for the Light” was returned to Fitzgerald’s heirs, along with a great many other materials from the Ober files, at some point after Fitzgerald’s death.⁴ This typescript eventually came to rest in a vault in a Philadelphia bank together with other unpublished manuscripts and typescripts owned by Fitzgerald’s grandchildren. In 2011 they decided to allow some of this material to be sold to collectors and libraries. Six items, including the manuscript of an unpublished story called “The I.O.U.,” were successfully auctioned at Sotheby’s on 15 June 2012.⁵ More items will be offered in future sales at Sotheby’s.

Before the June auction, I was provided with copies of the materials in the vault for use in my work on the Cambridge Fitzgerald Edition. I read through the unpublished stories and suggested to the Fitzgerald Trust that “Thank You for the Light” might deserve publication. It was not a lost masterpiece, but it was certainly an intriguing artifact from a dark period of the author’s life. The story was not incomplete or aborted work. It was a finished narrative, judged by Fitzgerald to be ready for submission and sent by him to his agent with the suggestion that it be offered to the *New Yorker*. The fact that no magazine took the story in 1936 was an indication of how Fitzgerald had been typecast as a writer, not a judgment about the quality of the story. The trustees agreed that “Thank You for the Light” was worthy of publication. They took over matters from that point and asked Harold Ober Associates, which still handles Fitzgerald’s literary rights, to submit the story to the *New Yorker*. “Thank You for the Light” was sent to the magazine on 13 June 2012, with a note reminding them that they had rejected it in 1936. Might they want to reconsider? Five days later, in an exchange of witty e-mails, the *New Yorker* accepted the story.

Advance reactions to “Thank You for the Light” were quite positive. Articles by Charles McGrath and Clyde Haberman appeared in the *New York Times* on 31 July and 3 August, respectively, and were reprinted in numerous other American newspapers. Commentaries were published in the *Los Angeles Times* (25 August) and the *Christian Science Monitor* (2 August); *Newsday* (25 August) and the online *Paris Review Daily* (22 August) weighed in after publication. The British took note of the story; Sarah Churchwell published an article on it in the *Guardian* for 10 August; James Campbell commented on the story in the *Times Literary Supplement* for 31 August. “Thank You for the Light” has been translated

into Italian and will likely be rendered into other languages. And in the current digital age, one finds multitudinous reactions to the story in the blogosphere. To someone of my generation, the extent of this online activity is remarkable.

The story is about loneliness. It is about some of the ways human beings avoid alienation and despair. Mrs. Hanson is weary from a long day of work in an unfamiliar sales territory. Searching for a quiet place to smoke, she wanders into a Catholic cathedral. She is not a Catholic and is not religious; it has been “a long time” since she has prayed. She walks toward “a splash of light in one corner” where she finds a sexton extinguishing the last few votive candles in the sanctuary. “I guess you came here to pray,” he says. “Yes, I did,” she answers. After the sexton leaves, Mrs. Hanson does kneel and pray, awkwardly but sincerely, “for her employer, and for the clients in Des Moines and Kansas City”—the only people for whom she can think to pray. When she finishes, she kneels up—that is, she raises herself from the folding bench—and sits back on the pew.

Mrs. Hanson has become aware of an image of the Virgin Mary that is suspended above her in the sanctuary. “In her imagination,” writes Fitzgerald, “the Virgin came down, like in the play ‘The Miracle,’ and took her place and sold corsets and girdles for her and was tired, just as she was.” The allusion is to *Das Miracle* by the German-American playwright Karl Gustav Vollmoeller (1878–1948), a play that Vollmoeller wrote in collaboration with the director Max Reinhardt (1873–1943). This play, based on a twelfth-century Spanish legend, tells the story of a medieval nun who flees from her convent with a knight, has adventures of a mystical nature, and is accused of witchcraft. While she is gone, a statue of the Virgin Mary in the chapel of her convent comes to life and replaces her, fulfilling her duties and performing her devotions. Eventually the nun returns and resumes her place; the statue goes back to its original lifeless form. *Das Miracle*, first performed in Germany in 1911, was staged as *The Miracle* in both London and New York in 1924. Fitzgerald might have seen the New York production; and he would have been familiar with Vollmoeller’s work in the cinema: the German playwright was best known as the author of the screenplay for *Der Blaue Engel* (*The Blue Angel*), the film that made Marlene Dietrich a star in 1930.

Mrs. Hanson, sitting in her pew in the sanctuary, holds an unlighted cigarette. She dozes off for a few minutes, and then awakens with a sense “that something had changed.” The cigarette in her hand is now alight. She takes a puff “to keep the flame alive” and looks up at the Madonna in her “vague niche in the half-darkness.” “Thank you for the light,” says Mrs. Hanson. Then, feeling

that she should say something more, she kneels forward again and, with the smoke from the cigarette drifting up toward the Virgin, she says, "Thank you very much for the light." The first line is literal and straightforward; the second line is open to other interpretation.

Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" is one of several stories he wrote about loneliness and alienation. It was published first in the March 1933 issue of *Scribner's Magazine*. Hemingway's story appeared while Fitzgerald was living in Towson, Maryland, near Baltimore, in a house called "La Paix" on the Bayard Turnbull property. Fitzgerald was working on *Tender Is the Night*, which Scribner's would publish in the spring of 1934. Hemingway included "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" in *Winner Take Nothing*, a collection of stories published by Scribner's in October 1933. It is possible that Fitzgerald deliberately did not read "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" or any of the stories in *Winner Take Nothing* while he was finishing *Tender Is the Night* in the spring and fall of 1933. He wrote several times of his fear that Hemingway's style would creep into his own if he read Hemingway while composing important work.⁶ But Fitzgerald did read the story later. On 10 May 1934, almost exactly one month after the formal publication of *Tender Is the Night* (12 April 1934), he sent Hemingway a critique of *Winner Take Nothing*, suggesting that the collection needed more stories, that it lacked the unity of *In Our Time* (1925), and that it "did not have as large a proportion of 1st flight stories" as *Men Without Women* (1927) (*Life in Letters* 259). On 1 June, in another letter to Hemingway, Fitzgerald told him that the choice of title for the collection was not "particularly fortunate" (*Life in Letters* 262). "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" is the second story in *Winner Take Nothing*. Fitzgerald most likely read the story in that collection.

Most readers of this article will be familiar with "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." It is perhaps Hemingway's most eloquent statement of the bleakness and absurdity of human existence. The protagonist is an aged widower who keeps despair away with drink. This old man does not wish to take alcohol alone; he wants to drink with dignity in a clean place, well-lighted and orderly. It will not do to drink standing up in a murky bar or in an unclean, all-night bodega. The old man, sitting at a table in a café, is observed by two waiters who work there. One of the waiters has no comprehension of the old man's dilemma; the other waiter, who is older, is familiar with loneliness and despair. He knows that people develop strategies for avoiding the absurdities of existence. They adopt political or economic causes; they pursue sex and other pleasures of the flesh; they accumulate money and possessions; they devote themselves to gustatory pursuits; they listen to music; they go to movies; they smoke; they read.

Some of them become avid followers of sports teams, like the nun in "The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio" (1933), which is another story collected in *Winner Take Nothing*. Often they drink, because alcohol is a supreme antidote for loneliness. And they pray—a meaningless exercise that nevertheless brings comfort and peace.

The older waiter in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" knows that many people seek solace in prayer but believes that prayer is an empty practice. In a now-famous incantation toward the end of the story, Hemingway (writing from the older waiter's point of view) presents this version of the Lord's Prayer: "Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada." He follows with a variation on the Hail Mary: "Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee" (Hemingway, *Winner* 23–24). The story ends a few lines later with the older waiter telling himself that his fears are probably only caused by insomnia. "Many must have it," he thinks to himself (24).

When I read "Thank You for the Light" for the first time I thought immediately of "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." I cannot prove that Fitzgerald's vignette is a response to Hemingway's now-classic story, but for purposes of interpretation, "Thank You for the Light" can certainly be read *against* "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place."⁷ Fitzgerald's story can be seen as a counterstatement, deliberate or not, to Hemingway's story. The two pieces of writing might be said to epitomize certain of the major differences between the writings of the two men. At this point in his career, Hemingway was primarily a realist and a materialist. Fitzgerald, by contrast, was an idealist and a fabulist. Romanticism, religion, and mysticism are present in Fitzgerald's work from the beginning and persist throughout his career. These elements do not make themselves apparent in Hemingway's writing until later on, possibly in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), perhaps in *Across the River and Into the Trees* (1950), and certainly in *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). Fitzgerald and Hemingway address many of the same conundrums and dilemmas in their writings—the influence of money on morality and behavior, the workings of chance and fate, the near-impossibility of enduring love—but they come at these problems from very different philosophical stances.

"A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" can perhaps be seen as a man's story. Its characters are men; their attitudes toward the absurdities and injustices of life are the attitudes of males, hard-edged and absolute. The old man, a widower, does not want to drink in an unpleasant place. Just a week before, he attempted to hang himself but was saved by a niece. Now he wants only a quiet establishment, without music or noise, in which to drink and pass time. Eventually death will come. "Thank You for the Light," by contrast, might be read as a woman's story.

Its protagonist is a middle-aged widow and a workingwoman, almost the only one I can think of in Fitzgerald's fiction. She seeks a quiet place to rest and have a cigarette before resuming her day. She does not want to smoke on the street; she would not want to be seen standing in a doorway or leaning against a wall. She seems emotionally sound, free of despair. She is only forty, she still has hope, and many things might yet come to her.

For Fitzgerald, a prayer to the Virgin Mary would not be a salutation to "nothing," as it was to Hemingway's waiter. Fitzgerald is saying that there is always light ahead somewhere, for Mrs. Hanson and for others. Perhaps a lingering loyalty to his Catholic upbringing lies behind this brief tale, this story that had been "hanging around" in his head "for a long time." Certainly Mrs. Hanson's work, selling corsets and girdles in the Midwest, is as pointless as most work. All the same, she persists in it. Such labor provides her with order and identity and a sense of purpose. In the small miracle recounted in the story, Mrs. Hanson discovers that she is not entirely alone. The Virgin Mary has touched her, as if on the shoulder, very lightly. Although she is not a practicing Catholic, Mrs. Hanson must now realize that at least one other woman is always with her and is watching over her, and that this woman can be addressed in a prayer.

Notes

1. West, "The Lost Months," publishes for the first time ten letters from Fitzgerald to Ober that were removed from the Ober files at some point after the author's death in 1940. Photocopies of these letters were donated anonymously to Princeton University Library in 2004.

2. Ober gives no indication in the letter of who wrote the rejection note. Possibly it was written by Harold Ross, who founded the *New Yorker* in 1925 and edited the magazine until his death in 1951.

3. "Dearly Beloved" was most recently reprinted in *The Lost Decade* (256–58).

4. Jennifer McCabe Atkinson consulted this typescript while preparing "Lost and Unpublished Stories by F. Scott Fitzgerald." Atkinson summarized the story in a few sentences but was dismissive about it. The miracle in the story, writes Atkinson, is "ludicrous and absurd rather than clever and humorous" (53). An earlier version of the story also survives in typescript, with a few handwritten revisions by Fitzgerald, in the Fitzgerald Additional Papers at Princeton University Library. This typescript was used by Ruth Prigozy in preparing "The Unpublished Stories: Fitzgerald in His Final Stage." Prigozy sees little value in "Thank You for the Light," finding its conception "fundamentally vulgar." The lighting of the cigarette by the Virgin is for Prigozy "both incongruous and offensive." Prigozy does note that Fitzgerald captures Mrs. Hanson's "bone-tiredness, the weariness and lassitude of both body and spirit" (82).

5. See the Sotheby's auction catalogue, *Fine Books and Manuscripts Including Americana*, lots 99–104 (66–68).

6. See, for example, “Pasting It Together” (*My Lost City* 149).

7. I also cannot demonstrate that it is a reply to Hemingway's remark about Fitzgerald's “romantic awe” of the rich in the *Esquire* text of “The Snows of Kilimanjaro.” That story was published for the first time in the August 1936 issue of the magazine, which would have appeared on the newsstands in mid-July of that year (Fitzgerald had an essay, “Afternoon of an Author,” in the same issue). Fitzgerald's letter to Hemingway telling him to “lay off me in print” is dated 16 July 1936, just after the August issue appeared and about a month after he sent “Thank You for the Light” to Ober (*Life in Letters* 302). It would be tidy to report that “Thank You for the Light” was written a little later, in July or August of 1936, but that is not the case. It was written in late May or early June, too early to be an answer to “The Snows of Kilimanjaro.”

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