F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Ice Palace”

Climate, Culture, and Stereotypes

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Introduction

“The Ice Palace,” first published on 22 May 1920 in the Saturday Evening Post, is a story of how stereotypes and prejudices destroy the engagement of Sally Carrol Happer of Georgia to Harry Bellamy of an unnamed Northern city. Beneath the relatively uncomplicated plot are complex American social phenomena – regional pride and conflict – that have worldwide correlative. In particular, “The Ice Palace” deals with the socio-psychological dualism of the regional superiority–inferiority complex, especially as it is manifested in Harry Bellamy attitudes towards both his hometown and the South, where his fiancée is from. The special appeal of the story lies in the fact that it is not simply about the American North–South conflict stemming from the Civil War (1861–65) and the period before it. While Harry’s region belongs to those states that formed the Union, which defeated the secessionist Confederate States of America, it is fairly young in terms of American westward expansionism and therefore, unlike Sally Carrol’s South, does not possess time-honoured traditions or long-established patrician families. Hence, Harry feels both contempt and envy towards Southerners, as will be outlined in this contribution. It will also be shown that while Sally Carrol is more open to accepting the North than Harry is of the South, instinctively she is repelled by Harry’s world; most notably, she develops a strong dislike of the women who are to be her future relatives.

Here it must be noted that almost all the people we meet in this story are either rich, like Harry Bellamy and his family and, presumably, Sally Carrol, whose father is apparently a doctor (there is a passing reference to his medical books, 69), or economically independent like Sally Carrol’s Southern friends. The clash between the Southern and Northern cultures that occurs in the story unfolds between the patrician ends of both cultures. Thus, while a story of regional conflict, “The Ice Palace” is also, to a lesser extent, a story of intra-class conflict.

However conscious Fitzgerald is of history and class attitudes, climate is the most important factor in shaping his characters’ world-views and determining their actions. In choosing nature as the primary determinant of his characters’ personalities, Fitzgerald incidentally reveals his own prejudices and tendency to stereotype. Fitzgerald’s Southerners are lazy but warm-hearted and his Northerners are industrious and cold. The ice palace, a monolithic structure built entirely out of blocks of ice, symbolizes the coldness of the North. Here, Sally Carrol gets lost and nearly freezes to death. Fitzgerald is not a neutral observer. He is biased in favour of the South’s passive acceptance of nature and opposed to the North’s desire to harness nature. In this regard, the ice palace is supposed to symbolize Harry Bellamy’s community’s harmony with nature, but becomes a symbol of the dangers of attempting to control natural elements.

North and South: Harry’s and Sally’s pride

While the picture which Fitzgerald paints of the South is more concrete (Sally comes from the fictitious town of Tarleton in Georgia), the Northern area that Harry is from and which Sally Carrol visits in the winter remains vague. Many hints point not to the American east coast with its old wealth and deep-rooted family traditions, but to the Midwest with its relatively young wealth and its social insecurities, which surface when Harry is visited by Sally Carrol.

In the short story, there is extrinsic and intrinsic evidence suggesting that Harry’s town might well be Fitzgerald’s birthplace, Saint Paul, Minnesota, which has been hosting an annual Winter Carnival featuring an ice palace since 1886. The official website of the Saint Paul’s Winter Carnival notes the following in its history of the festival:

In 1886, Saint Paul was America’s fastest growing city. Growing from 39,000 residents in 1880 to 120,000 residents in 1886, Saint Paul had also become America’s third largest rail center. To celebrate their city’s success, Saint Paul