

A Visual and Historical Approach to Teaching F. Scott Fitzgerald's
"Bernice Bobs Her Hair"
Christopher F. Johnston, Broward College

Originally published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1920 and later included in Fitzgerald's first book of short stories, *Flappers and Philosophers*, also published in 1920, "Bernice Bobs Her Hair" ("BBHH") originated with a letter written by Fitzgerald to his sister, Annabel, in which he offered her some advice about how to be more popular with the boys. At the bottom of this letter, he wrote "Basis for Bernice." "BBHH" was not received well by literary critics when it first was published; the story was labeled sentimental, light, immature, and commercial. I teach this story along with a few other frequently anthologized short stories by Fitzgerald, such as "Winter Dreams" and "The Ice Palace" in my Modern American Literature survey class at Broward College on South Florida, and, fortunately, my students have been much kinder than the critics in Fitzgerald's day.

Although I believe that my students' enjoyment and engagement with "BBHH" stems from my pedagogical approach, I must admit that some of its success is attributable to the storytelling abilities of its author. On a basic level, the story and the characters are fun, and it is generally entertaining to see how the differences and tensions between Bernice and her cousin and nemesis, Marjorie, play out. Equally arresting is Fitzgerald's insight into the privileged world from which he came and that served as the basis for so much of his work. In "BBHH", just as he does elsewhere, Fitzgerald gives the reader an "insider's" perspective into the world of old wealth. It feels at some points that he is less a fiction writer and more a sociologist or anthropologist explaining to "outsiders" the rules, customs, and norms of elite Midwestern society in the early 20th century.

Take, for instance, how Fitzgerald explains the nuances of "cutting in" in reference to the Saturday night country club dances that Marjorie and Bernice attend.

No matter how beautiful or brilliant a girl may be, the reputation of not being frequently cut in on makes her position at a dance unfortunate. Perhaps boys prefer her company to that of the butterflies with whom they dance a dozen times an evening, but youth in this jazz nourished generation is temperamentally restless, and the idea of fox-trotting more than one full foxtrot with the same girl is distasteful, not to say odious. When it comes to several dances and the intermissions between she can be quite sure that a young man, once relieved, will never tread on her wayward toes again.

Here, Fitzgerald explains the intricacies of this ritual and how it works to someone who might not be familiar with "cutting in" and all that it entails. Of course, this is a very foreign concept and practice for most of my students at Broward College. Like many community colleges, the student population is diverse, comprised of many Hispanic and working class students. Yet, Fitzgerald's discussion of dancing rituals among blue-blooded Midwesterners in the early twentieth century interests many of them. The students and I often chalk this up to the Fitzgerald's ability to take his reader seamlessly into another time and place.

I have found time and again that students are gratified by the ending of "BBHH". They seem to feel that Marjorie gets what she deserves when Bernice chops off her braid and throws it on the porch of Warren, the guy they had been fighting over. But here I urge caution and remind them that it is difficult to really find a hero or heroine in this story. What is evident about this culture or this world, whether Fitzgerald intended this or not, is that these people are all self-absorbed and petty.

No character comes out looking good; they're all flawed in different ways. Marjorie might be the more fun, modern woman, but she is also jealous and spiteful. Although Bernice becomes a more modern woman, she lets her emotions get the best of her when she chops off Marjorie's hair. The men in "BBHH" are minor characters, and the adults are sort of useless; they can offer their children no real guidance or advice because they are out-of-touch and oblivious to their concerns and problems. So to counter my students' endorsement of Bernice and her act of revenge, I try to remind my students that the characters in "BBHH" represent America's elite at the time and that none of them come out looking too good.

Once we get beyond the entertainment that Fitzgerald's storytelling and his characters provide, I try to dig deeper into the story using a visual and historical approach, which brings me to the main point of this paper. There are three things I focus on and want my students to take away, and they're all related to the story's context. First, I highlight the way the story encourages a discussion and analysis of gender and sex issues in 1920s America. I understand the differences and arguments between Marjorie and Bernice as really the differences and tensions between two types of 1920s women: the more traditional Victorian woman represented by Bernice and the new, modern woman represented by Marjorie. Therefore, we'll spend a lot of time going over the argument that the two women in the story have because they are having a debate that many were having at that time over the notion of womanhood and femininity. For instance, Marjorie criticizes Bernice for quoting Louis May Alcott's *Little Women*, for being too traditional and too much like their mothers. When Bernice accuses Marjorie of being "hard and selfish" and not having a feminine quality in her, Marjorie retorts by saying that "girls like you are responsible for all of the tiresome colorless marriages; all of those ghastly inefficiencies that pass as feminine qualities." As this argument shows, this is a generation of women faced with a choice of what it means to be

"feminine" and of how a woman should act and what should they do, and the dialogue between Bernice and Marjorie reflects that.

Of course, I don't expect my students to have all of this historical background, but that is where the usefulness of a visual and historical approach becomes evident. I use the story as an opportunity to teach them some historical terms, namely, "new woman," "modern woman," "Victorianism," "flapper," and, of course, "bobbed" hair. Most students know what a bob is, but they don't really understand the implications of a girl like Bernice getting a bobbed cut in that time period. Therefore, I present the class with two images; the first is of a traditional American Victorian woman from the late 1800s. As is expected, her hair is long so it is pulled up, and her dress goes down to floor, covers the wrists and neck, and accentuates the hips. I then present my students with a picture of a flapper with a bobbed haircut. This second image provides a stark contrast as the flapper has a short dress that reveals the legs, arms, and the neck. I then go on to explain how the flapper broke with the Victorian norm of womanhood by being more provocative and doing things like smoking, drinking, dancing in jazz clubs, and flirting. This connection to flapperism is an important one to make. Although the term "flapper" is not mentioned specifically in "BBHH", Susan F. Beegel points out in her essay "Bernice Bobs Her Hair: Fitzgerald's Jazz Elegy for *Little Women*" that "when Bernice bobs her hair, a 'little woman' dies in the barber chair, and a flapper is born" (68). Thus, for Bernice to bob her hair was to identify with the "flapper," a woman perceived as more loose and prone to vice.

Providing students with this historical background and with these images helps them to understand, in particular, the dramatic manner in which Fitzgerald describes Bernice getting her hair bobbed in the barber shop. Fitzgerald writes:

Bernice stood on the curb and looked at the sign, Sevier Barber-Shop. It was a guillotine indeed, and the hangman was the

first barber, who, attired in a white coat and smoking a cigarette, leaned nonchalantly against the first chair. He must have heard of her; he must have been waiting all week, smoking eternal cigarettes beside that portentous, too-often-mentioned first chair. Would they blindfold her? No, but they would tie a white cloth round her neck lest any of her blood—nonsense—hair should get on her clothes.

Just as it was for Fitzgerald, Bernice's melodrama and paranoia always proves amusing to most of my students. It is, however, no laughing matter to Bernice. And for students to understand Bernice's feelings, they need to understand the social implications of the bobbed hairstyle for a girl like Bernice. Therefore, much of our class discussion of these passages is accompanied by visual images of both Victorian women and flappers as well as with discussions of the concept of the "new woman." This helps shed light on the authenticity of Bernice's fear. Her bobbed cut signified and symbolized an act of rebellion against a certain well-established and well-respected version of femininity. Thus, this would have been scandalous, and it's important for students to understand that.

In addition to a growing rift between the flapper and her Victorian predecessor, "BBHH" also locates a significant generation gap between the children of the 1920s and their parents. This brings me to the second part of my visual and historical approach. To highlight this aspect of the short story, I point out the way Fitzgerald opens "BBHH" with a description of the typical Saturday night dances at the country club. He focuses on the way the older generation of country club-goers, mainly the women, feel about the way the youngsters dance and carry themselves. He describes the older women as "middle aged ladies with sharp eyes and icy hearts behind lorgnettes and large bosoms" sitting in a "circle of wicker chairs" whose main function is to show "grudging admiration, but never approval, for it is well known among ladies over thirty five that when the younger set

dance in the summer-time, it is with the very worst in intentions in the world." Here, the older generation clearly disapproves. Importantly though, Fitzgerald explains the reality of the situation.

This critical circle [of women] is not close enough to the stage to see the actors' [the kids] faces and catch the subtler byplay. It can only frown and lean, ask questions and make satisfactory deductions from its set of postulates, such as the one which states that every young man with a large income leads the life of a hunted partridge. It never really appreciates the drama of the shifting, semi-cruel world of adolescence.

When we talk about this part of the story in class, I emphasize that this separation, while literal and actual, is also symbolic. In other words, it symbolizes what Fitzgerald sees as a growing and unbridgeable gap between the children of the 1920s and their parents. The source of this gap is the emergence of a youth-oriented mass and consumer culture in the early twentieth century. We discuss this historical development as well as the importance of another important one, the embrace of jazz music by youth culture. In "BBHH", Fitzgerald refers to the country club kids as the "jazz nourished generation," and it strongly is suggested by the author that jazz music is a major source of generational tension. Fitzgerald writes that "if they (the young) are not bombarded with stony eyes (by their elders) stray couples will dance weird barbaric interludes in the corners, and the more popular, more dangerous girls will sometimes be kissed in the parked limousines of unsuspecting dowagers." We know that Fitzgerald here is referring here to jazz music, although somewhat problematically, because, shortly after, he writes of how the young people at the dances "sway to the plaintive African rhythm of Dyer's dance orchestra." In this regard, jazz is perceived by the older generation as the soundtrack of bad behavior, not doubt because of its association with black urban culture.

The third and final historical development I cover with my classes when teaching "BBHH" is the growing tension or rift between religious and secular America in the early twentieth century. Of course, the famous Scopes "Monkey" Trial is decided five years after "BBHH" is published, but, as this case did not come from nowhere, it is worth mentioning as it helps students understand that developments in science and technology as well as the growth of popular amusements in the early 1900s threatened the power and importance of religion. This fear is embodied in "BBHH" in the character of Draycott Deyo, a young man who is studying to be a minister. At one point in the story, Bernice, after bobbing her hair, is forced to go to a dinner party at the Deyos, where she'll have to face Draycott. When Bernice first met him, prior to the dinner, at one of those country club dances, he informed her during a conversation that "feminine bathing is an immoral subject" and then proceeded to give her a lesson on the "depravity of modern society." Furthermore, Draycott's mother, Mrs. Deyo, who Bernice must also face, had recently given a lecture on "The Foibles of the Younger Generation" in which she devoted fifteen minutes to bobbed hair. My students know that it will be an awful and shameful experience for Bernice but teaching them that Draycott symbolizes the very real fears of traditional Christians at that time helps them to see why. It's not just that the Deyos dislike Bernice's hairstyle, they see in it the unraveling of the social order.

When I teach "BBHH", I try to highlight its value as a historical text, and by implication the historical value of all literature. For me, this entails not simply mentioning some historical background before discussing the story but rather demonstrating how specific historical eras give shape to characters, dialogue, and themes. Of course, writers and artists do not create in a cultural vacuum; their sense of their world finds its way into their creative work, and it remains the responsibility of the scholar-teacher to both locate that connection and, more importantly, to help students find

those connections as well. F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Bernice Bobs Her Hair" presents instructors of American Literature like myself with the opportunity to practice pedagogy that is interdisciplinary in the sense that historical images, namely photographs, and historical concepts can be drawn upon to enrich an interpretation of a literary text. In this regard, for students to understand Fitzgerald's tone and dialogue along with the attitudes, actions, and motivations of the characters in "BBHH", they need to see a flapper and her Victorian predecessor as well as understand how the historical shift to modernity in the early twentieth century created conflict among Americans along lines of gender, generation, and morality.

Bibliography

- Beegel, Susan F. "Bernice Bobs Her Hair": Fitzgerald's Jazz Elegy for *Little Women*." *New Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's Neglected Stories*. Ed. Jackson R. Bryer. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996. 58-73. Print.
- Curnutt, Kirk, ed. *A Historical Guide to F. Scott Fitzgerald*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. Print.
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. "Bernice Bobs Her Hair." *Anthology of American Literature: Volume II, Ninth Edition*. Eds. George McMichael, James S. Leonard, Shelley Fisher Fishkn, et al. Upper Saddle River: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2007. 1483-1499. Print.

Christopher F. Johnston is an Assistant Professor of English at Broward College in Davie, Florida. He earned his PhD in American Culture Studies at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. Christopher currently lives in Delray Beach, Florida with his wife Sheila.