

— 報 文 —

WAS RAYMOND CARVER INFLUENCED BY F. SCOTT FITZGERALD ?  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ALIENATED WHITE MEN  
IN CARVER'S "BICYCLES, MUSCLES, CIGARETTES"  
AND FITZGERALD'S "THE BABY PARTY"

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There is an uncanny resemblance between Raymond Carver's short story "Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarettes," and F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Baby Party." Both stories take place in suburban settings and in both stories two fathers get into a physical fight over problems involving their children. The resemblance may be coincidental. Nevertheless, the stories are enough alike to merit a comparative study.

"Bicycles Muscles, Cigarettes" opens with Evan and Ann Hamilton about to have dinner. They are waiting for their young son, Roger, to come home. We soon learn that Evan is trying to quit smoking. Ann, is sympathetic, saying:

"I'm so sorry, dear. I know what you're going through. But, if it's any consolation, the second day is always the hardest. The third day is hard, too, of course, but from then on, if you can stay with it that long, you're over the hump. But I'm so happy you're serious about quitting, I can't tell you." She touched his arm. "Now if you'll just call Roger, we'll eat." (21)

It is at this point that a boy who knows Roger comes over and says that, "I guess Roger is down at my house talking to my mother. Kip is there and this boy named Gary Berman. It's about my brother's bicycle" (22). Evan thinks that Roger is "in some kind of jam" over "a childish argument" and decides to go to find out what the problem is, though Ann has volunteered to go. The boy leads him to the Miller house, located in Arbuckle Court, where he finds only Mrs. Miller, a housewife who is at a loss without the presence of her husband, who, she says, is "out of town now" (28). Evan Hamilton learns that Roger, Kip Hollister and Gary Berman borrowed Gilbert Miller's bicycle when the Miller family was away on vacation. Kip claims to have returned the bicycle, leaving it at the Miller house but it is gone. It also comes out that the boys "rolled" the bicycle, which means, as Mrs. Miller explains, "Sending it down the street with a push and letting it fall over" (25). Evan

Hamilton expresses his disappointment with Roger and Kip for doing this. But the real problem is that the bicycle is missing. Before Gary's father shows up, Roger tells his father that Gary choked him though Gary claims Roger "started it" by calling him "a jerk" (24).

Evan is reasonable, not jumping to conclusions and scolding his son for "rolling the bicycle." The arrival of Gary Berman's father ends any hope of straightening out the problem of the missing bicycle. Mr. Berman is the opposite of Evan Hamilton. He is unreasonable. He is hostile and automatically takes Gary's side, shouting at the other boys to "Quiet down" because "I'm talking to Gary" (26). Gary tells his father his side of the story of what happened to the bicycle, which Roger insists is untrue. Then Gary asks to speak to his father in private and they go off into the living room. When they return Gary announces that it was Roger's idea to "roll" the bicycle (27) to which Roger indignantly responds: "It was yours!" and adds that Gary wanted to take the bicycle into the orchard and "strip it," that is, to take all the parts off of it (28). Mr. Berman, shouts at Roger: "You shut up!" He then complains of being "dragged out at night because of a couple of rough necks" and ends his tirade by saying to Kip and Roger that if they know where the bicycle is, "I advise you to start talking" (28).

At this point Evan tells Mr. Berman that he is "out of line" and tells Roger that they are leaving. He says to Mrs. Miller: "I intend to talk this over more with Roger, but if there is a question of restitution I feel since Roger did held manhandle the bike, he can pay a third of it if it comes to that" (28).

Gary and his father are in a belligerent mood. Gary complains to his father that Roger called him a "jerk" and Mr. Berman responds by saying, "Well he's a jerk. He looks like a jerk" (28). Mr. Berman is being as childish as his son and Evan Hamilton tells him: "I think you're seriously out of line here tonight, Mr. Berman. Why don't you get control of yourself?" (28). To this Mr. Berman responds, "And I told you I think you should keep out of it" (28). What Evan does not realize is that he is edging into a fight with Mr. Berman. When he is leaving he turns and stares at Mr. Berman. Mrs. Miller feels violence is in the air when she says nervously, "Mr. Hamilton" (29). But she does not finish because at this point Mr. Berman brushes past Evan, saying "Get out of my way!" and Evan slips off the porch "into some prickly crackling bushes" (29). It is at this point that he loses control and jumps Mr. Berman, wrestling him to the ground.

Evan's physical attack on Mr. Berman is sudden and irrational. The immediate cause is Evan's reaction to Mr. Berman's shove; yet why he behaved so extremely is left open. It could be that Evan would have acted differently were he not suffering from trying to quit smoking. In Fitzgerald's "The Baby Party" we find that John Andros is also irritated. His irritation comes from a variety of sources. A successful man, he feels that at thirty-eight he is getting old. He is irritated with his two and a half year old daughter, Ede, though he loves her and finds "solace in the thought of life continuing through his child" (209). His irritation has long and short term causes. He is irritated that Ede "had interrupted his rather intense love-affair with his wife, and she was the reason for their living in a suburban town, where they paid for country air with endless servant troubles and the weary merry-go-round of the commuting train" (209). We are told that,

After ten minutes the very vitality of the child irritated him; he was inclined to lose his temper when things were broken, and one Sunday afternoon when she had disrupted a bridge game by permanently hiding up the ace of spades, he had made a scene that had reduced his wife to tears.

This was absurd and John was ashamed of himself. (209)

Like Evan Hamilton, John Andros is in a state of irritation. With Evan the irritation is physical, extraordinary and temporary, the effects of trying to stop smoking. Otherwise, Evan seems in every way a happy and well balanced man. With John the irritation goes deeper. We are told that "his life had been a series of struggles up a series of rugged hills" against "ill-health and poverty" and that as a consequence "he cherished less than the usual number of illusions. Even his feeling about his little girl was qualified" (209). He is not altogether happy with fatherhood, nor is he entirely happy with his relationship with his wife or with where he lives.

John is in good humor the day his wife says that she is taking Ede to a baby party at the next door neighbors. He does not seem to mind that "little Ede had confirmed the business by shouting, 'I yam going to a *pantry*' into John's unsuspecting left ear" (209). His wife tells him, "Drop in at the Markeys' when you get home, won't you dear?" (209). He remains in a good humor; nevertheless he is still cynical about the party and his wife's motives for going to it:

John laughed and decided to get an early train out; the prospect of a baby party in some one else's house amused him.

“What a peach of a mess!” he thought humorously. “A dozen mothers, and each one looking at nothing but her own child. All the babies breaking things and grabbing at the cake, and each mama going home thinking about the subtle superiority of her own child to every other child there.” (210)

John Andros has no illusions about why his wife is going to the baby party and why the baby party was organized in the first place. It is meant to be a social competition among the mothers. He goes to the baby party late but as he approaches the Markey house he himself is drawn into this competitive spirit because at heart he loves his daughter and is proud of her:

As he walked along drawing his lungs full of cold air his happiness increased, and the idea of a baby party appealed to him more and more. He began to wonder how Ede compared to other children of her own age, and if the pink dress she was to wear was something radical and mature. (210)

In this sense John is a normal parent.

When John comes to the Markeys' house he finds that the party has deteriorated into a childish argument among the adults:

As he mounted the brick step and rang the bell he became aware of voices inside, and he was glad he was not too late. Then he raised his head and listened—the voices were not children's voices, but they were loud and pitched high with anger; there were at least three of them and one, which rose as he listened to a hysterical sob, he recognized immediately as his wife's.

“There's been some kind of trouble,” he thought quickly.

Trying the door, he found it unlocked and pushed it open. (210)

At this point there is a flashback and the narrative centers upon the view point of John's wife. She is socially very competitive: “The baby party began at half past four, but Edith Andros, calculating shrewdly that the new dress would stand out more sensationally against vestments already rumpled, planned the arrival of herself and little Ede for five” (210). The effect is that when Edith and Ede enter “the music was temporarily drowned out by a sustained chorus, consisting largely of the word *cute* and directed toward little Ede . . .” (211). Fitzgerald adds: “She was not kissed—this is the sanitary age—but she was passed along a row of mamas each of whom

said “c-u-t-e” to her and held her pink little hand before passing her on to the next” (211).

After Ede is included in the party “as an active member” (211) we learn that Edith has contempt for Mrs. Markey and that probably that Mrs. Markey has contempt for her:

Edith stood near the door talking to Mrs. Markey, and keeping one eye on the tiny figure in the pink dress. She did not care for Mrs. Markey; she considered her both snippy and common, but John and Joe Markey were congenial and went in together on the commuting train every morning, so the two women kept up an elaborate pretense of warm amity. (211)

Edith is not so naive as to not see through the pretense of Mrs. Markey, even if she is not aware that she too is as vulgar as her neighbor. We can see the move to a confrontation coming when Edith thinks harshly about Mrs. Markey’s complement to her daughter:

“Little Ede looks perfectly darling,” said Mrs. Markey, smiling and moistening her lips in a way that Edith found particularly repulsive. “So *grown-up*—I can’t *believe* it!”

Edith wondered if “little Ede” referred to the fact that Billy Markey, though several months younger, weighed almost five pounds more. (211)

As time passes the babies naturally get restless. They take to “sterner sport” in running about. But they are rounded up by the mothers and the situation remains fairly calm. Fitzgerald comments: “They were modern babies who ate and slept at regular hours, so their dispositions were good, and their faces healthy and pink—such a peaceful party would not have been possible thirty years ago” (212). All would be fine at this point except that Edith cannot make a graceful exit as spectacular as her late arrival. This is because John is late and she wants her husband to be at the party:

Edith glanced anxiously at her watch—it was almost six, and John had not arrived. She wanted him to see Ede with the other children to see how dignified and polite and intelligent she was, and how the only ice-cream spot on her dress was some that had dropped from her chin when she was joggled from behind. (212)

This lingering at the party to impress her husband ultimately proves to be a major error. Ede, who is restless like the other children, bullies Billy Markey. Little Ede points her finger at Billy's teddy bear and says, "I want a bow-wow," apparently mistaking it for a dog:

"That isn't a bow-wow, dearest, that's a teddy-bear."

"Bear?"

"Yes, that's a teddy-bear, and it belongs to Billy Markey.

You don't want Billy Markey's teddy-bear, do you?"

Ede did want it. (212)

Ede tries to take away Bill's teddy bear:

There was a sudden wail. Ede had obtained Billy's teddy-bear by pulling it forcibly from his arms, and on Billy's attempt to recover it, she had pushed him casually to the floor.

"Why Ede!" cried her mother, repressing an inclination to laugh. (212)

At first Joe Markey is good-natured about the incident, saying "jovially" to Billy, "Let a girl knock you over! You're a fine fellow." He wants to let it go, but Mrs. Markey, worried, asks, "Did he bump his head?" (212). Still Joe wants to let it go and says jokingly, "He bumped something else, didn't you, Billy? He bumped something else" (213).

Still, there would be no problem except that Ede and Billy continue their fight over the teddy-bear. Billy tries to get it back but without success. Worse, Ede pushes Billy down:

Suddenly, encouraged by the success of her former half-accidental maneuver, Ede dropped the teddy-bear, placed her hands on Billy's shoulders and pushed him backward off his feet.

This time he landed less harmlessly; his head hit the bare floor just off the rug with a dull hollow sound, whereupon he drew in his breath and delivered an agonized yell.

Immediately the room was in confusion. With an exclamation Markey hurried to his son, but his wife was first to reach the injured baby and catch him up into her arms.

"Oh, *Billy*," she cried, "what a terrible bump! She ought to be spanked." (213)

Still the situation could be saved were it not for Edith's pride and insensitivity. She scolds her daughter, whispering "you bad girl!," but she does this only "perfunctorily" (213). But then something worse happens:

Ede put back her little head suddenly and laughed. It was a loud laugh, a triumphant laugh with victory in it and challenge and contempt. Unfortunately it was also an infectious laugh. Before her mother realized the delicacy of the situation, she too laughed, an audible, distinct laugh not unlike the baby's, and partaking of the same overtones.

Then as suddenly she stopped. (213)

At this point Mrs. Markey's face "had grown red with anger" and Joe Markey speaks "with a note of reproof in his voice when he says his baby's head is "swollen already" (213). Suddenly, Mrs. Markey loses her temper and says with a trembling voice: "I don't see anything funny about a child being hurt!" (213). But the situation deteriorates even more:

Little Ede meanwhile had been looking at her mother curiously. She noted that her own laugh had produced her mother's and she wondered if the same cause would always produce the same effect. So she chose this moment to throw back her head and laugh again.

To her mother the additional mirth added the final touch of hysteria to the situation. Pressing her handkerchief to her mouth she giggled irrepressibly. It was more than nervousness—she felt that in a peculiar way she was laughing with her child—they were laughing together.

It was in a way a defiance—those two against the world. (213-214)

This scene, it can only be noted in passing, resembles the scene in Carver's short story "Put Yourself in My Shoes." In it Mr. Meyers, who, with his wife, is visiting their former landlords, Mr. and Mrs. Morgan. The Morgans are angry at the Meyerses for violating the lease, particularly by bringing in a cat, and tell a series of anecdotes about deception and betrayal that are meant as subtle reproofs to Mr. and Mrs. Meyers, whom the Morgans cannot openly insult because they are guests. At the end of one anecdote Mr. Meyers begins to laugh—Carver even says he "giggled" at one point (109). The more angry the Morgans become the more reason Mr. Meyers finds to laugh. The psychology is very much the same in Fitzgerald's story.

When Meyers leaves the Morgans, however, he is laughing, thus avoiding what

could have been a very ugly confrontation, as we have in “Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarettes.” This does not happen in “The Baby Party.” Mrs. Markey orders Edith and “your brat” out of the house. Edith quickly takes offense. More insulting words are exchanged between the two mothers, with an upset Edith in the end calling Billy “a f-fat little fool” (214) which Joe Markey happens to hear when he comes down the stairs. His entry into the fray further deteriorates an already terrible situation. He speaks to her very much in the manner that Evan Hamilton speaks to Mr. Berman to tell him that he is “out of line”: “‘Why, Mrs. Andros,’ he said sharply, ‘can’t you see the child’s hurt? You really ought to control yourself’” (214). This way of speaking seemingly reasonably to an angry person is a way of being condescending, taking advantage, in fact, of someone’s lack of control, and is a guarantee for making the angry person angrier. This is what happens to Mr. Berman when Evan tells him that he is “out of line” and with Edith too:

“Control m-myself!” exclaimed Edith brokenly. “You better ask her to c-control herself. I’ve never heard anybody so c-common in my life.” (214)

Mrs. Markey is so angry now that she says to her husband, “If she won’t go, just take her by the shoulders and put her out!” (214). It is at this point that John shows up at the Markey house. He is brought into the fray without knowing what has happened:

“Don’t you dare touch me!” cried Edith. “I’m going just as quick as I can find my c-coat!”

Blind with tears she took a step toward the hall. It was just at this moment that the door opened and John Andros walked anxiously in.

“John!” cried Edith, and fled to him wildly.

“What’s the matter? Why, what’s the matter?”

“They’re-they’re putting me out!” she wailed, collapsing against him. “He’d just started to take me by the shoulders and put me out. I want my coat!”

“That’s not true,” objected Markey hurriedly. “Nobody’s going to put you out.” He turned to John. “Nobody’s going to put her out,” he repeated. “She—” (214)

Before Joe can offer any further explanations Edith demands they go and says, “They’re so *common*, John” (215) which makes Joe tell her, again in an angry but



seemingly reasonable tone that again sounds much like Evan Hamilton: “You’ve said that about enough. You’re acting sort of crazy” (215). At this point Edith tells John, “They called Ede a brat!” (215). Thinking his wife and child have been insulted for no good reason John becomes angry and insults Joe. He ends with: “‘You’re not only common,’ he returned, ‘you’re evidently an awful bully—when there’s any helpless women and children around” (215). This makes Joe angry and the two men fight on the frozen lawn in front of the Markey house—a scene that Carver may have been thinking of when he wrote the fight scene between Evan Hamilton and Mr. Berman in “Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarettes.” Yet how the two sets of men begin and end their fights and the manner in which their fights take place expose some strong cultural differences between suburban American men in Fitzgerald’s day and Carver’s. It also says something about the nature of American suburbs. Before I discuss the fight between these two sets of men I will discuss American suburban life as it is pictured by Fitzgerald and Carver.

Though Fitzgerald does not say where “The Baby Party” takes place, the physical details like the icy winter, the commuter train and the upper class nature of the suburbs suggest Long Island around Great Neck in Suffolk County which is the setting of *The Great Gatsby*. What is striking about the suburban life Fitzgerald describes is its sense of gentility as well as wealth (people are well-off enough to afford servants). There is a sense of community present, though John and Joe are in a sense alienated from the everyday life of their suburb because they have to commute to work outside of where they live. This alienation is crucial in John’s misunderstanding of what has happened at the baby party and leads to the fight with Joe. Yet, there is enough of a sense of community for Edith and Mrs. Markey to at least go through the pretense of friendliness, though they actually have no real common grounds for real community. John and Joe only commute by chance together. There is no other bonding. Nor is there any community need in the suburban neighborhood for community bonding. The baby party is not organized for the common need of the families to share knowledge on taking care of babies or to discuss problems that parents have in common. The “modern” babies in the “sanitary age,” we sense, are being taken care of by some other distant and impersonal but benevolent science. The babies are treated like house pets and the party is organized not so much for their pleasure but for the pleasure of their parents. Secure in the “sanitary age” against many childhood maladies, their primary concern is not survival but status.

The babies are trophies. But still, in Fitzgerald's suburb people at least know their neighbors and maintain a certain level of politeness and grace, however thin it really is.

Carver's suburb is part of the postwar "urban sprawl." There is no indication that Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton know any of their neighbors. When Gilbert Miller's brother is leading Evan to his house there is this exchange:

"How far?" Hamilton said as they started down the sidewalk.

"Over in Arbuckle Court," the boy answered and when Hamilton looked at him, the boy added, "Not far. About two blocks from here."  
(22-23)

This indicates that Evan barely knows his neighborhood. This is further shown a few paragraphs later:

They turned a corner. The boy pushed himself along, keeping just slightly ahead. Hamilton saw an orchard, and then they turned another corner onto a dead-end street. He hadn't known of the existence of this street and was sure he would not recognize any of the people who lived here. He looked around him at the unfamiliar houses and was struck with the range of his son's personal life. (23)

The last line is important. In this suburban community the only real community is the children's. The children know the neighborhood better than the adults and they know each other's parents. If the social life of Fitzgerald's suburb is ruled by wives, Carver's suburb's social life is ruled by its children.

Significantly, Evan has his meeting with Mrs. Miller in the kitchen, traditionally the woman's territory of the house. As it is, Mrs. Miller, a polite and decent woman, is barely in control. The boys in the kitchen, we soon see, are more in charge than the mother:

Hamilton sat down in a chair at the other end of the table and looked around. A boy of nine or ten, the boy whose bicycle was missing, Hamilton supposed, sat next to the woman. Another boy, fourteen or so, sat on the draining board, legs dangling, and watched another boy who was talking on the telephone. Grinning slyly at something that had just been said to him over the line, the boy reached over to the sink with a cigarette. Hamilton heard the sound of the cigarette sputting out in a glass of water. The boy who had brought him leaned against the

refrigerator and crossed his arms. (23-24)

Mrs. Miller says nothing about the boy smoking, though he is under age and under the law she can be charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor. The boys' extreme informality rules. (If any of this bothers Evan or seems strange to him we are not told. Mrs. Miller does not know any of the parents of her sons' friends and must rely on the boys to find them:

“Did you get one of Kip's parents?” the woman said to the boy.

“His sister said they were shopping. I went to Gary Berman's and his father will be here in a few minutes. I left the address.” (24)

The boys also have their own private language and a certain linguistic sophistication with which the adults try to keep up. Evan doesn't know what the expression “rolling it” means until Miss Miller translates it for him (25). It is Gilbert who offers the closest thing to a practical solution: “I think my bike cost about sixty dollars, you guys,” the boy named Gilbert said. “You can pay me for it” (24). A little later he says to Kip, “You can pay me off like five dollars a week” (25). Both times, Mrs. Miller gets angry at him, perhaps trying to wrestle for parental control, saying, “You keep out of this, Gilbert” (24) and, “Gilbert, I'm warning you” (25). But she is powerless, as are all the adults, to decide what to do about the missing bicycle.

A sense of estrangement is established by Fitzgerald in that he does not say what John and Joe do for a living, showing that they lead another existence outside the suburb. Carver's sense of estrangement is even more extreme. We know nothing about any of the characters. As readers we share in the characters' sense of estrangement. What formal politeness that exists in the Miller kitchen is established in the interaction between Mrs. Miller and Evan Hamilton. But it is the politeness that one shows to strangers. This is in stark contrast to the world of the boys, who though casual in their behavior, seem to have established some kind of informal and unspoken rules of behavior among themselves.

When Mr. Berman arrives he is not just angry but bewildered. The only person to whom he is not a stranger in the Miller kitchen is his son, Gary. Just as Edith Andros will not believe that her little girl cannot even be at fault and her husband, John, implicitly believes in her, Mr. Berman completely trusts his son. Obviously, Gary is a vandal and a dirty fighter and a liar. But perhaps because of the estrangement of the suburb, he has complete control over his father. Mr. Berman sees himself and his son victimized by the strangers around him, whom he regards as “rough-

necks” (much in the way xenophobic people regard people from other countries and cultures). While Mrs. Miller’s strategy to deal with estrangement is to avoid responsibility and Evan Hamilton’s is to offer half-hearted reasonable suggestions, Mr. Berman’s is to try to maintain control by being a bully (and Carver shows that in this case the son is like the father). Mr. Berman’s estrangement from the community and his uncritical belief in the absolute goodness of his off-spring leads to the fight with Evan Hamilton, which is analogous to what happens between John and Joe in “The Baby Party.”

As stated before, the fight between John and Joe and Evan Hamilton and Mr. Berman show the cultural values of Fitzgerald’s and Carver’s suburbs. Their respective fights show the degree of alienation experienced by the two pairs of men. In sum, Fitzgerald’s men in “The Baby Party” are more verbally communicative and show more respect for each other, angry as they are, than do the men in “Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarettes.” Let us look at each fight in more detail, first Fitzgerald’s, then Carver’s.

To begin with, Joe Markey gives John Andros ample warning that he is going to fight with him, indicating that he wants a fair fight to be a fight of honor. The following happens right after John has accused Joe of being a bully of women and children:

“Wait a minute!” Markey took a step forward; he was trembling slightly, and two large veins on his temple were suddenly full of blood. “You don’t think you can get away with that, do you? With me?”  
(215-216)

John also behaves as if he wants their fight of honor to be fair. He takes his time in indicating that he is accepting Joe’s challenge to a fight:

Edith, still weeping, had started for home. After following her with his eyes until she reached her own walk, John turned back toward the lighted doorway where Markey was slowly coming down the slippery steps. He took off his overcoat and hat, tossed them off the path onto the snow. Then, sliding a little on the iced walk, he took a step forward.  
(216)

We are told that the men “rushed at each other, both swinging wildly and pressing out the snow into a pasty mud underfoot” (216). Yet they fight, we sense, with mutual respect:

For ten, fifteen, twenty minutes they fought there senselessly in the moonlight. They had both taken off coats and vests at some silently agreed upon interval and now their shirts dripped from their back in wet pulpy shreds. Both were torn and bleeding and so exhausted that they could stand only when by their position they mutually supported each other—the impact, the mere effort of a plow, would send them both to their hands and knees. (216)

Both men are aware that though they are having a fight of honor their behavior is unseemly by community standards. Both men are sensitive to how they will be judged by their community if their fight is brought to public light:

But it was not weariness that ended the business, and the very meaninglessness of the fight was a reason not for stopping. They stopped because once when they were straining at each other on the ground, they heard a man's footsteps coming along the sidewalk. They had rolled somehow into the shadow, and when they heard these footsteps they stopped fighting, stopped moving, stopped breathing, lay huddled together like two boys playing Indian until the footsteps had passed. Then, staggering to their feet, they looked at each other like two drunken men.

"I'll be damned if I'm going on with this thing any more," cried Markey thickly.

"I'm not going on any more either," said John Andros. "I've had enough of this thing." (216)

During their fight bonding between the two men takes place. Though the fight started over a silly misunderstanding and was pointless, a real mutual respect and affection between John and Joe is formed. In the process of fighting each man has discovered the other to be a good man, which they apparently never understood though they have lived next door to each other and commuted together to work. Joe offers John his home to clean himself off before going home and their affection for each other grows from there:

"Want to come in and wash up?" he asked suddenly.

"No, thanks," said John. "I ought to be going home—my wife'll be worried."

He too picked up his coat and then his overcoat and hat. Soaking

wet and dripping with perspiration, it seemed absurd that less than half an hour ago he had been wearing all these clothes.

“Well—good night,” he said hesitantly.

Suddenly they both walked toward each other and shook hands. It was no perfunctory hand-shake: John Andros’s arm went around Markey’s shoulder, and he patted him softly on the back for a little while.

“No harm done,” he said brokenly.

“No—you?”

“No, no harm done.”

“Well,” said John Andros after a minute, “I guess I’ll say good night.” (217)

There is a sense that the goodness each man has discovered in the other is that he can separate anger from hatred. This is something that their wives seem incapable of. (Fitzgerald is writing from a masculine bias, though his values are not exclusively male values.) In “Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarettes” Evan Hamilton, reasonable as he seems to be, cannot make that distinction, as we shall see when examining his fight with Mr. Berman.

As noted before, violence is in the air between Evan Hamilton and Mr. Berman. Evan probably feels it when after Berman’s outburst, “And I told you I think you should keep out of it” (29) he nervously tells his son “You get home, Roger” and adds emphatically, after he moistens his lips, “I mean it” and “Get going!” (28-29). Mrs. Miller seems to feel it when Evan stands in the doorway and looks “at Berman, who was crossing the living room with his son” (29). But does it mean that because he does this he wants a fight? Probably not. It is likely he only wants to show a silent reproof to Mr. Berman. But the problem is that we do not know. It seems that Evan himself does not know. After Mr. Berman says, “Watch out now, get out of my way!” and brushes Evan aside, Evan acts without thinking rationally, as if he is driven by some force beyond his control:

He couldn’t believe it was happening. He moved out of the bushes and lunged at the man where he stood on the porch. They fell heavily onto the lawn. They rolled on the lawn, Hamilton wrestling Berman onto his back and coming down hard with his knees on the man’s biceps. He had Berman by the collar now and began to pound his head against

the lawn while the woman cried, "God almighty, someone stop them! For God's sake, someone call the police!"

Hamilton stopped.

Berman looked up at him and said, "Get off me." (29)

The differences between John's and Joe's fight is radically different from the fight between Evan Hamilton and Mr. Berman. There is no clear agreement between the men that they will fight. Evan attacks Mr. Berman without warning. There is no mutual respect between the fighters. We find that Evan, in fact, fights in a dirty way. He pounds Mr. Berman's head against the lawn after pinning him down. It is as if he were trying to kill Mr. Berman. Only Mrs. Miller's cries apparently make him come to his senses. In the end there is no reconciliation between Evan Hamilton and Mr. Berman. The incident ends with nothing at all being said between the two men. There is no real closure. We see that the older boys, who had come out onto the porch to watch the fight, "began feinting and punching each other on the arms and ribs" (29). Mrs. Miller tells them, "You boys get back in the house" and delivers the final word on the fight: "I never thought I'd see," she said and put her hand on her breast" (29). The last Evan notices of Mr. Berman is not his person but his car: "He heard car doors slam, an engine start. Headlights swept over him as he walked (30)." (This is a Fitzgeraldian touch, reminiscent of *The Great Gatsby* where the anonymity of the automobile plays a significant role.)

In both stories there is bewilderment expressed by the wives of the protagonists. In Fitzgerald's story when Edith says, "I don't understand yet how it all happened," John answers "Neither do I," but provides a hypothesis: "I guess these baby parties are pretty rough affairs" (217). In Carver's story, Ann Hamilton shakes her head and says, "I really don't believe any of this yet" (31) but Evan can provide no answers and does not even try.

In looking back on the fight with Joe, John feels no remorse for his fight, though he tells his wife, "I don't want this to get all over town" (217). In fact, even after Joe and his wife have come over for reconciliation he does not come down immediately but stays upstairs with his baby daughter in his arms and whispers to her, "Dear little girl, dear little girl" (219). The fight has cleared away his mixed feelings about his daughter and realizes how much he loves her:

John Andros knew at length what it was he had fought for so savagely that evening. He had it now, he possessed it forever, and for

some time he sat there rocking very slowly to and fro in the darkness.  
(219)

It must be emphasized here that Joe in the traditional sense does the right thing in initiating a formal reconciliation between his family and John's. It is he who initiated the fight and therefore it is up to him to bring the matter to closure. This is something that John seems to instinctively understand. But Edith does not. She tells the "colored" maid she does not want to see Joe and his wife when the latter says,

"Mr. and Miz Markey downstairs an' want to see you. Mr. Markey's he's all cut up in pieces, mam'n. His face look like a roast beef. An' Miz Markey she 'pear mighty mad." (218)

Thinking, perhaps, that they are over to continue the fight, she exclaims, "Why what incomparable nerve!" But to her statement that, "I wouldn't go down for anything in the world" (218) John is adamant in ordering her to meet them whether she likes it or not:

"You most certainly will." John's voice was hard and set.

"What?"

"You'll go down right now, and, what's more, whatever that other woman does, you'll apologize for what you said this afternoon. After that you don't ever have to see her again."

"Why—John, I can't."

"You've got to. And just remember that she probably hated to come over here just twice as much as you hate to go downstairs." (218)

John restores order by asserting his patriarchal authority over his wife and she obeys him, just as Joe's wife has obeyed her husband in coming over to the Andros's house. I will have more to say about this later.

The sort of male self-assurance that we see in "The Baby Party" is almost entirely absent in "Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarettes." After the fight Kip begins to cry and Roger sobs "once" and Evan puts his arm "around the boy's shoulders" (218). There is confusion after the fight and Evan feels remorse:

"I'm sorry," Hamilton said. "I'm sorry you had to see something like that," Hamilton said to his son.

They kept walking and when they reached their block, Hamilton took his arm away.



“What if he’d picked up a knife, Dad? Or a club?”

“He wouldn’t have done anything like that,” Hamilton said.

“But what if he had?” his son said.

“It’s hard to say what people will do when they’re angry,”

Hamilton said. (30)

Though John and Joe beat each other up badly enough to bring bruises to their faces this fear of extreme violence occurring is never an issue. When Edith wonders if, “You may be hurt internally,” John answers, “Not a chance” (217). John and Joe know what people like themselves do when they are angry: they fight cleanly. John’s reassurance seem to put Edith at ease. Though Edith does say that John “must have been crazy” (217) to have the fight (she thought John would “fix it all up”), she does not worry about any psychological implications of the fight and only says that she is glad that she bought beef instead of veal because that is better for treating John’s black eye. “Do you know I came within an ace of ordering veal? Wasn’t that the luckiest thing?” she says (217).

Though Roger has been shocked by seeing his father fight with Mr. Berman, he quickly starts to take pride in his father’s physical prowess: after all, his father had beat the father of the bully who had choked him. But this pride is not shared by Evan, as we see in the following exchange:

“Let me feel your muscle,” his son said.

“Not now,” Hamilton said. “You just go in now and have your dinner and hurry up to bed. Tell your mother I’m all right and I’m going to sit on the porch for a few minutes” (30)

Evan Hamilton does not at this point reflect deeply on himself. It maybe that he is not by nature a reflective man. That he is disturbed by the fight, however, is shown by his remembrance of a fight that his father had once:

He had once seen his father – a pale, slow-talking man with slumped shoulders—in something like this. It was a bad one, and both men had been hurt. It had happened in a café. The other man was a farmhand. Hamilton had loved his father and could recall many things about him. But now he recalled his father’s one fistfight as if it were all there was to the man. (31)

In both stories a fight occurs after pride has been hurt. In “The Baby Party” the pride is social pride. John is right about baby parties being “pretty rough

affairs” because a great deal of egotism and snobbishness is involved. Though the Markey family’s social status seems exactly equal to that of the Andros family, Edith nevertheless must put on airs about being superior to Mrs. Markey. It is her snobbery that causes the fight. But because this snobbery comes out a system of tangible, if not absolute values, there is a social formula that allows for differences to be reconciled. There is no such way of finding reconciliation in Carver’s suburban world.

While the solution Joe and John find is inclusive, Evan Hamilton’s final solution to dealing with problem of Mr. Berman and his son is exclusive. When saying good night to Roger he tells his son:

“You take it easy from now on. Stay away from that part of the neighborhood, and don’t let me ever hear of you damaging a bicycle or any other personal property. Is that clear?” Hamilton said. (31-32)

To Evan “that part of the neighborhood” represents a source of bad influences, one that turns his son into a vandal and himself into a violent man, as well as a place where there is physical danger. In the Fitzgerald story social pride, and therefore social face, matter. In the Carver story social status and how people see one are not issues as there is no visible social inequality. Evan Hamilton’s fight with Mr. Berman is probably one of pride, but that pride is internal, how a person feels about him or herself. In the end, solutions to social problems are privatized and confined to one’s self or to one’s family. Evan sees only further isolation as a way of protecting his family. Society ceases to exist when the doors of the family home are closed. The extremely private nature of the suburban family is brought out at the end of “Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarettes.”

Like the “Baby Party,” “Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarettes” ends with the father being alone with his child. Because of the fight, a bonding occurs between Evan and Roger, as it does between John and his baby daughter because of his fight. This develops when Roger starts to remember his grandfather, Evan’s father, and asks about him:

“Dad, was Grandfather strong like you? When he was your age, I mean, you know, and you—”

“And I was nine years old? Is that what you mean? Yes, I guess he was,” Hamilton said. (32)

They remember that Evan’s late father smoked. At this point Evan wants to share something with his son about his quitting smoking. At the beginning of the

story Evan sniffs “his knuckles and his fingers” and tells his wife that he “can smell it”—the tobacco odor—and Ann Hamilton responds by saying, “I know. It’s as if it sweats out of you” (21). He now wants Roger to smell the tobacco odor on the back of his hand, perhaps to teach his son not to take up smoking, or at least to share with him an adult concern. This gesture does not work:

The boy took the hand in his, sniffed it, and said, “I guess I don’t smell anything, Dad. What is it?”

Hamilton sniffed the hand and then the fingers. “Now I can’t smell anything, either,” he said. “It was there before, but now it’s gone.” Maybe it was scared out of me, he thought. “I wanted to show you something. All right, it’s late now. You better go to sleep,” Hamilton said. (32)

It is at this point where Evan has failed to draw his son into the experiences of the adult work that Roger tries to draw him into his own community of children:

The boy rolled onto his side and watched his father walk to the door and watched him put his hand to the switch. And then the boy said, “Dad? You’ll think I’m pretty crazy, but I wish I’d known you when you were little. I mean, about as old as I am right now. I don’t know how to say it, but I’m lonesome for it. It’s like—it’s like I miss you already if I think about it now. That’s pretty crazy, isn’t it? Anyway, please leave the door open.” (32-33)

This is followed by what may be Carver’s most enigmatic ending: “Hamilton left the door open, and then he thought better of it and closed it halfway” (33). The ending may be interpreted in many ways. Evan, whose bonding with his son has had coolness to it that is the exact opposite of that of John’s bonding with his daughter at the end of “The Baby Party,” may be trying to tell his son that the world of children and adults are different. In doing so he might be saying that adults getting involved in children’s fights only leads to disaster (as Fitzgerald is saying about husbands getting involved in the fights of wives). But maybe not. The point, I believe, is that we do not know and are not meant to know. In the end Carver says that what defines reality for each family cannot be understood by anyone outside the family and that, in the end, it is the only reality that matters in the world of the Hamiltons and similar suburban dwellers. In the end the reader is shut of the private world of the Hamiltons.

While there seems a more than coincidental resemblance between “The Baby Party” and “Bicycles, Muscles, Cigarettes,” there is a great difference between the worlds Fitzgerald and Carver write about and their world views. The world of “The Baby Party” is upper class, while Carver’s people are probably working class, though their occupations are never established. The presence of the “colored” maid reminds us of the Andros and Markey families’ social status. A rough equality exists between all of Carver’s people. Fitzgerald’s people care about appearances, Carver’s do not. Fitzgerald’s people live by certain social and moral certainties, while in Carver’s world the certainties are more absence than present. In both worlds the dominant culture is white.

Fitzgerald is basically a conservative in that he ultimately believes in traditional values. One of these values is that men, that is white men, must lead and their women should obey them. Fitzgerald is not comfortable with the independent new woman of the 1920’s. In fact, the too independent woman who causes trouble or is a bad moral influence is a reoccurring figure in Fitzgerald fiction, like the promiscuous Judy Jones in “Winter Dreams,” the reckless and dishonest Jordan Baker in *The Great Gatsby* and the spoiled and destructive Daisy Buchanan in the same novel. The baby party in “The Baby Party” is essentially a woman’s affair. Staying home while their husbands commute away from their suburb they have formed a tighter community than the men have among themselves. Yet, Fitzgerald portrays the two main wives as silly and irrational. Left on their own they create chaos, which their men get caught up in and literally have to fight their way out. Order is established when the men overcome their alienation from their environment and each other and take control of their respective households. On the surface Fitzgerald presents a picture of an almost a utopian vision in the end: The men rule, the women obey, the child is cherished, the “colored” servant serves and everyone (except the “colored” servant) is rich. Yet, under the surface Fitzgerald shows that the calm of the suburbs is only surface. We do not know if the women will be reconciled and how this will affect John’s and Joe’s relationship. We can be sure that the poisonous social climbing of the suburbs will have no end. The only absolute thing John can be sure of in the end is the love of his baby daughter, whom he now knows he loves deeply no matter if she is being cute or naughty.

This is the certainty that exists in the end for Evan Hamilton. He is shown how deeply his son loves him. Yet, it is possible that after the fight with Mr.

Berman he thinks that his son loves him for not the right reasons. There is total equality in Carver's suburb but little in the way of moral certainty. Even a father who seems as perfect as Evan Hamilton can suddenly, for no apparent reason, go crazy again and become violent.

As often occurs in Carver's stories, he creates parallel characters. Evan Hamilton, the good father, is paralleled with Mr. Berman, the bad father. Ann Hamilton is paralleled with Mrs. Miller. What should be noted is that there is a state of equality between Evan and Ann. Ann, besides being a wife, is also a friend and confidant. She can sympathize with Evan's withdrawal symptoms like a buddy because she has gone through the same thing. Though she has performed the traditional female role of fixing dinner, she is as capable of being an arbitrator when they learn that Roger is "in some kind of jam:"

"Do you want me to go?" Ann Hamilton asked.

He thought a minute. "Yes, I'd rather you went, but I'll go. Just hold dinner until we're back. We shouldn't be long." (22)

In contrast, Mrs. Miller, clearly a traditional housewife, is not capable of making decisions without the presence of her husband. Carver seems to be saying that Evan's and Ann's relationship is best.

There is an openness between Ann and himself. We see this same openness between Evan and Roger. Evan can openly admonish Roger about "rolling" Gilbert's bicycle in front of other people. In contrast, Mr. Berman and his son have to sneak off into the living room to talk to each other. It is this openness that Carver seems to see as some kind of saving grace of the alienated suburb, but not entirely. It is alienation that breeds violence and everyone is susceptible to it, even a good father and husband like Evan Hamilton.

Fitzgerald's "The Baby Party" and Carver's "Bicycles, Muscles and Cigarettes" are stories about the violent behavior of white American men. In both stories violence follows humiliation. In Fitzgerald's story the violence cleans away the humiliation so that order can be restored. In Carver's story the violent act by Evan against Mr. Berman is a form of humiliation. The humiliation that Evan gives Mr. Berman is not rectified and therefore it goes back to Evan and his family in the form of self-doubt and perhaps doubt on Evan's part about his son's affection. It could be—though we do not know—that the half-opened door represents an uncertainty about the nature of affection that John at the end of "The Baby Party" is free of.

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