



## Inventing the Self: Illusion, Identity, and Authority in F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Absolution" and "Bernice Bobs Her Hair."

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines F. Scott Fitzgerald's short fiction as a site of modern identity formation under conditions of weakened authority. Through close readings of "Absolution" and "Bernice Bobs Her Hair," it argues that the self in Fitzgerald emerges as a constructed formation shaped by illusion, performance, and desire. Rather than restoring coherence, these mechanisms reorganize subjectivity around projection and social enactment, producing forms of agency that remain unstable and contingent. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from sociology, psychoanalysis, and modernity studies, the essay situates Fitzgerald's narratives within broader debates on the transformation of identity in modern culture. In "Absolution," imaginative projection generates a compensatory inward structure that intensifies division and isolation, while in "Bernice Bobs Her Hair," identity is constituted through performance within a social field governed by visibility and recognition. In both cases, the self depends on processes that cannot fully secure it, requiring continuous maintenance under shifting conditions. By placing Fitzgerald's short fiction at the intersection of narrative form and social theory, this article contributes to ongoing discussions of modernist subjectivity, demonstrating how literary texts register and produce the tensions between agency, instability, and the absence of stable grounds for identity.

### KEYWORDS

F. Scott Fitzgerald; Short Fiction; Self-Invention; Identity Formation; Authority; Performance; Illusion; Aesthetic Desire; Moral Fragmentation; Modernism.

### I. Introduction

Modern literature is often understood as emerging from a crisis of authority in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Critics of modernism have repeatedly described this period as one marked by fragmentation, instability, and the weakening of inherited forms of order (Bradbury and McFarlane 1976, 19–27; Berman 1982, 15–21). F. Scott Fitzgerald's short fiction offers a particularly sharp articulation of this condition. It has long been read as registering the tensions of modern American culture, especially the pressure placed on identity by shifting moral and social values (Bruccoli 1981, 158–65; Callahan 1994, 3–9). His stories explore what happens when religious, moral, and social frameworks lose their force: the self comes into being as a constructed formation, sustained through imagination and no longer secured by stable belief. In Fitzgerald's work, the collapse of authority does not open onto simple liberation. It produces a condition in which identity must be actively formed in response to disorientation and uncertainty. Characters do not recover inherited structures of meaning; they construct substitutes. In "Absolution," Rudolph Miller's crisis of faith coincides with the emergence of an imagined alternative to religious meaning. The confessional scene does not restore moral order; it redirects perception. Father Schwartz replaces doctrinal clarity with an aesthetic vision:



“It’s a thing like a fair, only much more glittering... You’ll see a big wheel made of lights turning in the air... and everything will twinkle. But it won’t remind you of anything, you see. It will all just hang out there in the night like a coloured balloon — like a big yellow lantern on a pole.”

“But don’t get up close,” he warned Rudolph, “because if you do you’ll only feel the heat and the sweat and the life.”

All this talking seemed particularly strange and awful to Rudolph, because this man was a priest. He sat there, half terrified...91

The imagery displaces religious reference with spectacle. Light, motion, and surface replace doctrine, while the insistence that it “won’t remind you of anything” marks a break from symbolic meaning. Distance sustains the illusion; proximity exposes its material emptiness. Within this shift, Rudolph’s recognition that there exists “something ineffably gorgeous somewhere that had nothing to do with God” (Fitzgerald 1924,91) follows naturally. The imagined figure of Blatchford Sarnemington emerges within this aesthetic field, not as a continuation of belief but as a substitute for it. Authority does not collapse into absence; it reorganizes itself around attraction, spectacle, and the promise of elevation.

A related movement appears in “Bernice Bobs Her Hair.” Bernice’s initial failure lies in her inability to generate recognition within a social environment governed by visibility and interaction. Fitzgerald signals this condition when he notes that she “failed utterly to give out the faintest impression of being worthwhile” (Fitzgerald 1922, 78). Her presence carries no effect within the field of perception that defines social existence.

Marjorie introduces a different logic of selfhood, one grounded in display, calibration, and audience response. Identity takes form through controlled speech, gesture, and suggestion, each directed toward the production of effect. Social space operates as a field of observation in which individuals are not simply present but continuously read, evaluated, and repositioned. Bernice’s initial failure lies in her inability to generate such effects; her transformation marks the acquisition of techniques that render her legible within this system.

This shift corresponds to what Goffman describes as the organization of social interaction through performance, where the self is not prior to action but emerges through the management of impressions before an audience (Goffman 1959, 22–26). Marjorie’s instruction effectively provides Bernice with a repertoire—timing, withholding, suggestive speech—through which she learns to stage herself. Recognition follows not from intrinsic qualities but from the successful alignment between performance and expectation. Identity becomes inseparable from the act of showing.

The structure remains unstable. Visibility depends on continuous enactment, and position within the social field can be altered through shifts in perception. The same mechanisms that produce recognition also permit rapid displacement. Bernice’s presence is sustained through interaction; once the performance falters or is reinterpreted, the identity attached to it dissolves.

Across these stories, Fitzgerald presents a self that takes shape under conditions where authority no longer secures meaning. Rudolph’s imagination and Bernice’s performance operate within different domains, one internal, the other social, yet both respond to the absence of stable grounding. Each produces a form of identity that exists only through ongoing enactment, whether through fantasy or through the management of appearances.

The mechanisms that enable this process recur across Fitzgerald’s fiction. Illusion furnishes the imagined content of the self, projecting figures through which coherence and distinction can be anticipated. Performance situates that content within interaction, rendering identity dependent on its successful presentation before an audience (Goffman 1959, 22–26). Desire operates as an orienting force, directing attention and sustaining attachment to these projections, thereby intensifying their experiential reality (Taylor 1989, 127–130). In combination, these elements reorganize identity



around enacted forms of meaning. The self does not precede these operations; it emerges through them as a provisional alignment between projection, presentation, and recognition. Such an alignment remains contingent, requiring continuous adjustment within shifting social contexts, a condition consistent with identity theory's understanding of the self as constituted through role-performance and the meanings attributed to it (Stryker and Burke 2000, 286–288). Identity thus comes to function as an activity.

This account of selfhood aligns with broader descriptions of modernity. Sociologists and philosophers describe a shift from externally grounded systems of meaning toward forms negotiated within the individual. Weber's concept of disenchantment marks the emergence of a world stripped of sacred authority (Weber 1919, 139–141), while Taylor describes a "secular age" in which belief becomes optional and contested (Taylor 2007, 2–3). Georg Simmel's analysis of modern culture further illuminates this condition, tracing how value becomes attached to forms of experience and intensity within an increasingly fragmented social world (Simmel 1903, 414–418). Fitzgerald's fiction translates these developments into lived experience, showing how the loss of authority reshapes consciousness, desire, and self-perception. In this sense, literature becomes a mode of grasping how individuals inhabit historical change at the level of feeling and self-understanding (Felski 2008, 14–18).

Identity has often been understood as a structured and relatively stable configuration of self, grounded in enduring frameworks such as social roles and normative expectations (Schmeck et al. 2013, 27). Modern literature presents identity as unstable and actively produced. The subject must construct a self in response to fragmentation. Narrative form participates in this process, shaping subjectivity as it unfolds (Armstrong 2005, 3–5). Franco Moretti's account of the *Bildungsroman* clarifies the historical stakes of this shift. The genre once staged a negotiation between autonomy and social integration; by the nineteenth century this reconciliation becomes increasingly strained (Moretti 1987, 22–26, 181–201). Modern literature intensifies this tension. The problem shifts toward the construction of the self under conditions that no longer guarantee coherence.

Fitzgerald sharpens this condition with particular precision. His characters respond to the collapse of authority through illusion, performance, and desire. These strategies enable development and agency, while also introducing instability and ethical uncertainty. Lionel Trilling observes that Fitzgerald's characters seek intensity and distinction within a cultural environment where moral coherence has weakened (Trilling 1950, 244–253). Their actions unfold within a field organized by appearance, recognition, and desire.

Existing criticism has examined Fitzgerald's aesthetics, modernity, and performance, but less attention has been given to the way these stories link failed authority to the compensatory construction of selfhood. Recent scholarship has further expanded the scope of Fitzgerald studies, particularly through collections such as *The Cambridge Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald* and ongoing work published in *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, which emphasize the continuing relevance of his short fiction to modernist debates on identity and cultural form (Kirk 2023; Curnutt 2020).

What distinguishes Fitzgerald within this broader field is the clarity with which he traces both the necessity and the cost of the production of identity. His stories do not treat illusion as simple escape, performance as decorative artifice, or desire as superficial impulse. These emerge as structural responses to a world in which authority has lost its force. At the same time, the narratives register the strain these responses impose on the self. The individual gains change, visibility, and expressive power. It loses stability, belonging, and ethical coherence.

This essay argues that "Absolution" and "Bernice Bobs Her Hair" present the shaping of the self as a compensatory response to failed authority. Illusion, performance, and aesthetic desire reorganize identity around enacted forms of meaning. They enable action and sustain growth. They also unsettle identity. By tracing this development, the essay shows that the fabrication of the self is



not a marginal theme but a structural condition of modern literary consciousness. Fitzgerald's fiction does not resolve this condition. It exposes it: the freedom to create the self emerges at the very point where the grounds for meaning have disappeared.

## II. Authority in Crisis: Institutional Failure and the Conditions of Self-Invention

One of the defining features of modernity, as it appears with particular clarity in F. Scott Fitzgerald's fiction, is the erosion of religious, moral, and social authority. His stories do not stand outside this transformation; they register it from within, giving it narrative form and psychological depth. As accounts of modernity have long suggested, stable frameworks of meaning give way to forms increasingly negotiated within the individual (Weber 1919; Taylor 2007). Fitzgerald's fiction situates itself within this condition, tracing how the weakening of these normative structures unsettles the formation of the self.

Within this context, authority figures in Fitzgerald rarely provide moral orientation. They appear unstable, coercive, or emptied of significance, reflecting what Alasdair MacIntyre characterizes as the fragmentation of moral discourse, where inherited ethical languages survive as disconnected remnants without binding force (MacIntyre 1981, 2–5). Fitzgerald gives this condition narrative shape, staging encounters between individuals and institutions that fail at the very moment they are most needed.

"Absolution" offers a particularly sharp instance of this crisis. Religious authority is embodied in Father Schwartz, a figure expected to guide the young protagonist, Rudolph Miller. Instead, Schwartz appears psychologically unstable and spiritually disoriented, increasingly unable to sustain the role assigned to him. His language becomes abstract and disconnected from the immediate situation, while his behavior signals a loss of control that reverses the expected hierarchy between priest and penitent. As the encounter unfolds, this instability becomes visible: "the priest was muttering inarticulate and heart-broken words... Father Schwartz collapsed precipitously down on his knees" (Fitzgerald 1924, 90). The collapse carries both psychological weight and symbolic force, marking the failure of religious mediation at the very moment it is required. Rudolph perceives this breakdown directly: "This man is crazy... and I'm scared of him" (Fitzgerald 1924, 90). The recognition is decisive. Authority no longer commands trust; it produces fear. Within this context, confession ceases to function as a mediating practice. It intensifies anxiety and sharpens uncertainty. This dynamic appears already in Rudolph's first encounter with the confessional, where "fear assumed solid form, and pressed out a lodging between his heart and his lungs" (Fitzgerald 1924, 78). The ritual becomes an experience of dread. A practice meant to reconcile guilt instead exposes its fragility. At the moment when guidance is most needed, authority gives way, leaving the subject without orientation or assurance.

Rudolph's encounter with religious authority is marked by fear, not trust. The structures of confession and communion fail to regulate the relationship between sin and forgiveness and intensify a sense of surveillance. Freud's account of moral internalization helps illuminate this dynamic: when authority is absorbed without integration, it produces anxiety and undermines ethical coherence (Freud 1908, 145–147). In Fitzgerald's story, the collapse of the priest removes even the semblance of divine mediation, leaving Rudolph to confront a world in which authority no longer organizes desire. What remains is isolation.

Parental authority reinforces this pattern. Rudolph's father represents a disciplinary model grounded in coercion, not understanding. His response takes physical form: he "sprang for him," and Rudolph "felt the dull impact of a fist against the side of his head, and glancing blows on the upper part of his body" (Fitzgerald 1924, 86). The scene is brief but intense, marked by force, confusion, and loss of control. Violence replaces guidance. The father does not interpret the child's condition; he suppresses it. Even after the assault, control continues through command and decision. At the church



door, he determines Rudolph's course of action: "I've decided you'd better go to confession again" (Fitzgerald 1924, 86). The child is not asked; he is directed. Authority here operates through imposition, not persuasion. Fitzgerald consistently depicts paternal figures in this way, as agents of control who fail to provide ethical orientation (Mizener 1965, 128–132; Callahan 1994, 44–48). The family, once a primary site of moral formation, appears instead as a space of pressure and compliance, where action is enforced but meaning remains unresolved.

A related configuration appears in "Bernice Bobs Her Hair," where social regulation replaces religious guidance as the dominant organizing force. Fitzgerald presents this world in explicitly theatrical terms. The country club becomes a stage, while the audience—"a great babel of middle-aged ladies with sharp eyes and icy hearts"—observes from a distance, "not close enough to the stage to see the actors' faces" (Fitzgerald 1951, 39–40). Social control operates through visibility, judgment, and distance; moral coherence recedes. Within this setting, Bernice initially relies on inherited identity—wealth, upbringing, and social status—to secure recognition. Fitzgerald exposes the fragility of this reliance through her own reflections:

"That her family was the wealthiest in Eau Claire... never occurred to her as factors in her home-town social success... Like most girls she had been brought up... on novels in which the female was beloved because of certain mysterious womanly qualities, always mentioned but never displayed" (Fitzgerald 1951, 43).

Here, the collapse of normative control unfolds at two levels. Inherited status fails to guarantee recognition, and the ideal of femininity reveals itself as empty language—invoked repeatedly yet lacking substance. Authority persists as discourse, but it loses its capacity to organize experience.

Marjorie's intervention introduces a new mode of social rule grounded in performance. She instructs Bernice not in essence but in technique—how to speak, how to attract attention, how to sustain interest. Identity becomes a matter of visible action. As previous studies have shown, this world functions as a theatrical system in which characters "strive to define... the role of rich young females" through performance (Assadi 2013, 2–3). Legitimacy shifts from moral grounding to the capacity to sustain appearance.

This conformation remains unstable. Bernice's transformation demonstrates that identity can be produced; it also exposes the arbitrariness of the system that rewards it. Recognition depends on performance, and performance stays contingent. What appears as self-creation unfolds as submission to a regime governed by spectacle.

Across both stories, authority persists as form without substance. Religious ritual fails to reconcile guilt; paternal discipline enforces obedience without meaning; social norms privilege appearance over authenticity. This condition resonates with Georg Lukács's account of a fragmented world lacking a unifying moral framework (Lukács 1971, 56–63). Fitzgerald does not simply depict the absence of authority; he reveals its hollow persistence.

The disintegration of inherited frameworks does not yield pure freedom. It produces a condition in which the projection of the self becomes inevitable. When institutions fail to define identity or provide meaning, individuals must assume that task. In "Absolution," Rudolph turns inward, constructing an alter ego that compensates for religious failure. In "Bernice Bobs Her Hair," Bernice reshapes herself in response to social pressures. In both cases, the enactment of the self emerges under constraint.

Seen in this light, this movement—from inherited forms of guidance to constructed identity—appears with particular clarity in Fitzgerald's fiction. As Michael Levenson observes, modernist texts often place individuals in the position of shaping their own identities (Levenson 1984, 37–45). Fitzgerald renders this condition with particular precision. In his stories, institutions fail to secure



meaning, and this failure pushes the individual toward acts of self-definition. Rudolph and Bernice do not enter a space of freedom; they are driven into construction, assuming a task once carried by religion, family, and social convention.

### III. Illusion as a Strategy of Self-Creation

Fitzgerald's fiction confronts a central problem: how can the self be sustained when the frameworks that once secured meaning begin to weaken? His stories approach this condition with particular clarity, presenting illusion as a necessary response. His characters rely on illusion in order to continue. As religious, familial, and social forms lose their capacity to organize experience, identity requires active shaping. Illusion becomes the medium through which such shaping occurs, providing a provisional coherence that experience itself fails to sustain. As studies of Fitzgerald's short fiction have shown, these narratives often function as sites of formal and thematic experimentation, where identity is shaped through projection and narrative structure (Prigozy 2002).

This condition has been described in broader intellectual terms by thinkers such as Weber and Taylor, who point to the diminishing force of shared belief and the instability that follows. Fitzgerald's stories render these developments at the level of lived experience. They show how inherited forms weaken, how perception shifts, and how desire changes direction. His fiction gives form to these consequences, tracing the emergence of new orientations that arise within this altered field of meaning.

In "Absolution," this process appears in Rudolph's response to the failure of religious mediation. The priest ceases to provide clarity, and confession intensifies uncertainty. In this moment of disorientation, Rudolph turns toward imaginative construction. He invokes the figure of Blatchford Sarnemington, who "seemed to him infinitely more real than the priest or even than God... a figure moving through great sweeping triumphs, with a suave nobility and an effortless superiority" (Fitzgerald 1924, 81).

The force of this passage lies in the comparison it establishes. The imagined figure acquires a degree of reality that exceeds both the priest and God. The displacement is complete. What once grounded meaning recedes, and the imagined figure takes its place. The description emphasizes movement, polish, and ease. Blatchford does not struggle, hesitate, or fail. The qualities attributed to him answer directly to Rudolph's condition. Where the child experiences anxiety, the figure embodies control. Where guilt produces tension, the figure moves without burden. Illusion here reorganizes identity, shaping a self that draws its coherence from projection rather than experience.

This imagined identity is defined through appearance and effect. Its coherence lies in how it presents itself. Identity takes shape through projection, through the sustained act of imagining oneself as already formed. The shift is decisive. Meaning moves away from moral orientation and settles in the capacity to sustain an image. The imagined figure acquires force through repetition, gaining density each time it is invoked.

The transformation becomes explicit when Rudolph recognizes that value has shifted: "There was something ineffably gorgeous somewhere that had nothing to do with God" (Fitzgerald 1924, 91). The term "gorgeous" carries particular weight. It signals attraction, intensity, and visual presence. It directs attention and organizes perception. The sentence marks a break. Meaning separates from religious reference and relocates in what draws the eye and holds attention. This reorientation gives direction while leaving the self exposed to instability, suspended between attraction and uncertainty.

The narrative reinforces this shift through the image of the "invisible line." Crossing it separates Rudolph from shared belief and places him within a private field of meaning. The self that emerges is inward and self-generated. It depends on repetition, on sustaining the imagined figure against competing pressures. This dependence introduces tension. Illusion holds the self together and



exposes it to instability at the same time. Fitzgerald sustains this tension, showing how the movement that enables identity also unsettles it, leaving the subject suspended between coherence and fragility.

A related configuration appears in “Bernice Bobs Her Hair,” where illusion takes shape within a social field governed by visibility and recognition. The problem of identity shifts from inward disorientation to public enactment. Fitzgerald constructs this environment in explicitly theatrical terms. The country club functions as a stage, while observation defines participation. The presence of an audience is decisive. Figures are seen, assessed, and positioned within a hierarchy of attention.

This arrangement determines Bernice’s initial failure. She enters a space in which recognition depends on performance, yet she lacks the capacity to produce it. Fitzgerald makes this visible through absence: “Bernice had neither the confidence nor the conversational daring which made girls sought after” (Fitzgerald 1951, 43). The sentence does more than describe deficiency. It defines the conditions of inclusion. Confidence and conversational daring operate as techniques, not traits. Without them, presence carries no effect. Bernice is not excluded by status; she fails to register within a field that requires continuous projection.

Her own reflections deepen this condition. She recalls that her family’s wealth and position “never occurred to her as factors in her home-town social success,” and that she had been raised on narratives in which feminine value remained undefined, “always mentioned but never displayed” (Fitzgerald 1951, 43). The gap is precise. The language of femininity circulates without content. It names qualities without specifying their form. What appears as cultural guidance offers no operative model. Bernice confronts a system that demands performance while withholding its rules.

Marjorie’s intervention resolves this gap at the level of technique. She does not redefine identity; she operationalizes it. Speech, timing, and suggestion become instruments through which presence is produced. Bernice learns to generate attention by shaping interaction, turning conversation into a site of calculated effect. Identity emerges through this process as something enacted and sustained through response. The social field confirms this transformation. Sound and movement register the shift: “the clatter of young feminine voices soars over the burst of clapping” (Fitzgerald 1951, 40). The image captures a world structured by response. Applause signals recognition, and recognition confers position.

The force of this arrangement lies in its instability. What is gained through performance remains exposed to reversal. Bernice’s success depends on repetition and adjustment, on maintaining alignment with shifting expectations. Her position carries no durability beyond its enactment. Marjorie’s later intervention exposes this condition with precision. The same techniques that produce attention also permit its withdrawal. Recognition shifts, and identity shifts with it.

Illusion in this context operates through enactment. It does not withdraw from the social field; it intensifies participation within it. The self takes shape through appearance, through the capacity to hold attention and direct response. This process grants mobility and influence. It also introduces exposure. Identity depends on forces that remain external and unstable.

Across this movement, Fitzgerald traces a form of self-creation tied to performance and sustained through recognition. Bernice acquires the means to act within her environment, yet the ground on which this action rests remains uncertain. The system that enables her transformation also renders it fragile. Illusion supports identity, while leaving it subject to disruption.

The dynamics traced in Fitzgerald’s fiction reach a further level of articulation when examined through the lens of psychic organization. Once coherence has been unsettled, the subject turns toward forms that can gather experience into a workable unity. This process does not resolve tension; it contains it. Freud’s account of the movement between the pleasure principle and the reality principle clarifies this condition by locating the subject within a field structured by competing demands (Freud 1911, 218–220). In Fitzgerald’s stories, this tension remains active. The figures that Rudolph and



Bernice sustain offer direction and intensity, yet they leave underlying conflicts unresolved. What emerges is a mode of dependence in which continuity relies on the repeated production of a sustaining image.

This dependence operates through desire. It directs attention toward figures that promise completion and invests them with significance. Rudolph's attraction to what he names the "gorgeous" concentrates his perception, drawing scattered impulses into a single focal point. The image does not reconcile experience; it organizes it, giving form to an otherwise diffuse condition. Bernice's pursuit of recognition performs a parallel function within a social environment structured by visibility. Her actions acquire coherence through their orientation toward response, shaping interaction into a sequence governed by anticipation and effect. In each case, desire provides movement and direction, while withholding stability.

The images that emerge within this process carry a distinctive function. They gather experience at the level of appearance, producing a surface coherence that can be sustained through repetition. Fitzgerald emphasizes this quality through the language attached to Blatchford Sarnemington, whose presence conveys polish, ease, and elevation. These attributes answer directly to Rudolph's condition, offering a form in which tension can be held without resolution. The same principle governs Bernice's transformation, where identity takes shape through techniques of presentation that align perception and response. What is achieved is not integration but coordination, a temporary alignment of elements that would otherwise remain dispersed.

This alignment, however, introduces a persistent vulnerability. The image that sustains the subject depends on conditions that remain external and shifting. Its force derives from its capacity to hold attention, to maintain its position within a field of competing impressions. Any alteration in that field affects the image and, with it, the coherence it supports. Fitzgerald traces this instability with precision. The figures toward which his characters orient themselves promise completion, yet they require continuous maintenance. The distance between projection and lived experience remains active, generating an ongoing tension that cannot be resolved within the terms of the image itself.

Lacan's account of desire sharpens this perspective by situating the subject in relation to an ideal image that remains out of reach. The image functions as a point of orientation, structuring movement and sustaining engagement. Fitzgerald's characters pursue such images through imagination and performance, renewing them through repetition. The gap between the constructed figure and lived experience does not diminish. It persists as a source of energy and instability at once, sustaining the process while preventing closure.

Fitzgerald's treatment of illusion therefore operates with exacting clarity. It appears as a necessary operation through which the self takes shape within unsettled conditions. At the same time, it introduces a fragility that cannot be overcome. Identity emerges through projection and depends on ongoing effort for its continuity. As this projection enters the social field, it seeks confirmation through response. At this point, the process assumes a new form: identity unfolds through performance, where appearance and recognition become inseparable.

#### **IV. Identity as Performance**

Fitzgerald's fiction renders this condition with particular precision. In "Absolution," Rudolph's imagined figure, Blatchford Sarnemington, functions as a role sustained through repetition. The act of naming—"He repeated the name... over and over... until it seemed to grow richer and fuller with each repetition" (Fitzgerald 1924, 81)—does more than reinforce the image. It produces it. Repetition here operates as rehearsal. The self does not appear fully formed; it is gradually assembled through reiterated projection.



This process develops over the course of the narrative. At its outset, Rudolph's relation to his imagined identity remains uncertain. His responses are marked by hesitation, fear, and fragmentation, particularly within the confessional setting where his speech falters and his sense of self remains unstable. The imagined figure emerges in this context as a compensatory form, but its hold is initially fragile. It appears intermittently, without full coherence or authority.

As the narrative progresses, however, this projection acquires greater stability. Rudolph begins to inhabit the figure more fully. The repeated invocation of the name produces a shift in confidence. The imagined identity acquires continuity and can be sustained across situations. His movement through space begins to reflect this change: when he imagines himself as Blatchford Sarnemington, his posture, perception, and sense of presence are altered. The figure organizes his experience, allowing him to move with a degree of assurance that was previously absent.

This process marks a transition from projection to enactment. An inward image acquires the qualities of performance. Rudolph begins to act through the figure of Blatchford Sarnemington, using it as a guiding role that shapes perception and movement. The imagined figure operates as a script: it directs posture, organizes response, and stabilizes presence. The process resembles a shift from rehearsal to performance. Repetition establishes the role, and sustained invocation allows Rudolph to inhabit it with growing assurance.

The dependence on an implied audience remains crucial. Even when the performance appears internal, it is oriented toward recognition. The imagined figure gains force through the anticipation of being seen, admired, and affirmed. This anticipatory structure aligns with Goffman's account of the self as something produced in relation to an audience, even when that audience is only imagined (Goffman 1959, 22–25). Rudolph's case illustrates how performance can operate prior to full social exposure. The self is first rehearsed inwardly, acquiring coherence before it enters a broader field of visibility.

What emerges is a form of identity that depends on enactment. It gains consistency through repetition and confidence through sustained performance. At the same time, this dependence introduces instability. The role must be continually maintained. Its coherence rests on ongoing projection, leaving it exposed to disruption if the performance falters.

This dependence becomes explicit in "Bernice Bobs Her Hair," where identity unfolds within a visible environment structured by attention and response. Fitzgerald presents a space in which presence must be actively produced and sustained. The dynamics of this process emerge in Bernice's retrospective awareness of her performance. After the evening, she reviews her conduct and recognizes that she had followed instructions with precision while adjusting her responses in real time, engaging and flattering others with increasing control. This moment marks acquisition. Bernice has learned to perform.

Her transformation lies in the shift from passivity to technique. Earlier, she failed to generate attention; now she directs it. Speech, gesture, and timing become calibrated. The acknowledgment that she followed instructions indicates discipline, while her adaptive responses show control. She studies the role provided by Marjorie and enacts it within a setting that initially resists her. The audience is not neutral. It is defined from the outset as "a great babel of middle-aged ladies with sharp eyes and icy hearts," whose "main function... was critical," offering "grudging admiration, but never approval" (Fitzgerald 1951, 39–40). It observes from a distance, "not close enough to the stage to see the actors' faces," and "can only frown and lean" in judgment. Her success lies in her ability to work within this environment. She converts resistance into response. Indifference gives way to interest. Attention gathers around her, and with it, a new form of presence.

The process continues as this performance stabilizes. Fitzgerald indicates that others begin to enjoy looking at her and listening to her, and that this response becomes the foundation of self-confidence. The sequence is clear. Confidence follows enactment. Response produces assurance. The



self acquires consistency through repeated confirmation across interactions. What begins as guided behavior develops into a sustained mode of presence capable of holding attention within a competitive field.

Marjorie's role remains central in this development. She provides the framework, functioning in a manner analogous to a playwright who constructs a role in advance. The script organizes action, but its realization depends on execution. Bernice must interpret, adjust, and sustain the role in practice. This introduces reflexivity. The acting subject divides attention between doing and observing, between expression and evaluation. Such reflexivity has been noted in performance theory, where actors review and refine their enactment through continuous self-observation. Bernice's success depends on this capacity. She speaks, registers the effect, and recalibrates. Identity takes shape through this ongoing adjustment, even when inner conviction remains uncertain.

This configuration also carries exposure. The earlier scene of humiliation establishes the stakes of visibility. At that moment, Bernice experiences herself as an object within a hostile field, "as though she were bound for the guillotine," with "the hangman... the first barber" (Fitzgerald, 1951, 55–56). The scene defines the risk embedded in performance. Her later success builds upon this moment. The same field that produced humiliation now allows her to command attention. Control of performance transforms her position, while the underlying exposure persists. Visibility continues to carry the possibility of reversal.

Rudolph's case presents a related dynamic in inward form, though under markedly different conditions. His imagined identity depends on repetition and projection, but it develops without a sustaining audience. The absence of a social field limits its confirmation. The figure circulates within a restricted space shaped by anticipation, where recognition is imagined but not tested. This condition affects its development. His enactment remains tentative and less assured, since it lacks the feedback through which performance gains stability. Bernice, by contrast, performs before a wide and often resistant audience, and her identity acquires force through interaction with it. The contrast reveals how performance depends on the presence of observers who confirm, challenge, and reshape what is enacted.

Goffman's account of impression management clarifies this process by showing how individuals sustain identity through controlled presentation before others (Goffman 1959, 22–25). Fitzgerald's characters enact this condition with precision: they adjust their behavior in anticipation of response, monitor its effects, and recalibrate accordingly. This emphasis on performance also aligns with critical accounts that read Fitzgerald's fiction as centrally concerned with the construction of identity through social interaction and narrative form (Curnutt 2004, 63–67). Lacan's account of identification further illuminates the instability of this arrangement. The subject aligns itself with an image that promises coherence while remaining dependent on its continued affirmation (Lacan 1977, 1–7).

Performance introduces a specific form of tension. It enables the self to appear and to act, while dividing it between enactment and observation. Identity gains presence through this process and remains exposed to revision. Fitzgerald traces this movement with clarity. The image that once provided inward coherence enters a field of visibility, where it must be sustained through performance and remains subject to change.

## V. Authority Replaced by Desire and Aesthetic Longing

As institutional authority weakens, Fitzgerald's fiction traces a reorganization of value in which orientation shifts toward attraction, intensity, and visibility. This movement introduces a tension between ambition and desire. Ambition is associated with intellect, direction, and purposive structure; it presupposes an end that can be articulated and pursued through disciplined action.



Desire, by contrast, operates through immediacy and impulse. It is drawn toward what attracts, what glimmers, and what circulates within perception. It does not organize itself around an end but around effect. The subject becomes oriented toward what can be felt and perceived in the present moment. This shift can be understood, in Freudian terms, as a form of displacement, whereby psychic energies once regulated by moral or religious structures are redirected toward substitute objects that provide satisfaction at another level (Freud 1908, 145–147). What had been governed by prohibition and structure is rechanneled into aesthetic and perceptual experience.

In “Absolution,” this transformation appears in Rudolph’s reorganization of experience following the failure of religious mediation. His recognition that his “private reservations were himself—and all the rest a garnished front and a conventional flag” (Fitzgerald 1924, 87) marks a decisive shift. The term *front* is particularly significant. It anticipates what Goffman later theorizes as the performed surface through which the self is presented to others (Goffman 1959, 22–25). What Rudolph identifies is a division within the self: the outward form persists as convention, while inward life becomes the primary site of value. Meaning is withdrawn from shared structures and relocated within a privately sustained sphere of experience.

This reorientation is developed most fully in the priest’s discourse on spectacle, where Rudolph encounters a mode of experience structured by distance and visual attraction. The amusement park appears as a field of light and motion in which objects “twinkle” and remain suspended “like a colored balloon... like a big yellow lantern” (Fitzgerald 1924, 91). The accompanying warning gives the description its force: approaching too closely brings one into contact with “the heat and the sweat and the life.” Value depends on maintaining distance. The image holds its power as appearance; closeness dissolves it into material immediacy.

Within this framework, Rudolph occupies a position defined by observation. The scene invites him to look, to register, and to respond at the level of perception. His relation to experience is shaped through this orientation. Attention moves outward toward images that promise intensity, while action recedes. Desire organizes perception by fixing on what attracts and remains just beyond reach.

This position has formative consequences. The self begins to take shape in relation to what is seen rather than what is done. Engagement would require entry into the scene, with its risks and consequences. Distance sustains the image and preserves its appeal. Rudolph’s attachment to what he later understands as the “gorgeous” reflects this structure. He is drawn toward appearances that gather meaning while remaining external to him. The attraction is sustained, yet incorporation remains incomplete.

A tension follows from this condition. The images that organize perception also define a limit. They orient the subject while keeping fulfillment deferred. Rudolph’s experience acquires direction through desire, while leaving his position within that experience unsettled. The spectator’s stance shapes a self that responds, anticipates, and imagines, while remaining suspended between attraction and distance.

In “Bernice Bobs Her Hair,” this reorganization unfolds within a social field structured by attention. Desire operates through circulation: it attaches to figures who attract notice and withdraws from those who do not. Bernice’s initial condition reveals her exclusion from this circulation. She remains present within the social scene yet fails to register within it. Her reflections show that she interprets success through inherited assumptions—family status, upbringing—while the environment in which she moves assigns value through response. The gap is conceptual. She does not initially grasp that attention must be produced.

Marjorie understands this system and operates within it with precision. Her influence lies in her ability to direct attention and shape its movement. The narrative signals this through the responses she elicits: admiration, imitation, and attachment cluster around her. Desire functions here as a structuring force. It orders relations, establishes hierarchy, and distributes visibility. Marjorie’s



instruction translates this structure into technique. One must engage, amuse, and sustain interaction in order to generate return attention.

Bernice's transformation shows how this logic is internalized. She learns to produce attention and to move within a field governed by shifting responses. Her success depends on her ability to study the role provided to her and enact it before an audience that initially resists her. She enters a space that observes critically and tests performance. Her achievement lies in her ability to convert that resistance into engagement. Figures who had ignored her begin to respond. Attention gathers, and with it, a new sense of presence. At the same time, this performance carries a distinctive tension. It is executed with precision, but it does not fully coincide with inward conviction. Bernice's later reflections indicate an awareness of the gap between the role and the self that performs it.

This condition corresponds to what Goffman describes as role-distance: the actor may perform a role effectively while maintaining a separation from it, signaling that the performance does not exhaust the self (Goffman 1959, 107–112). Bernice's conduct reflects this division. She delivers the lines, modulates her gestures, and sustains the required effect, yet her retrospective awareness shows that she recognizes the constructed nature of what she has done. The performance succeeds at the level of response while leaving a residue of detachment.

The instability of this arrangement becomes visible in the reversal that follows. The same mechanisms that produce visibility permit its withdrawal. The social field shifts. Attention reorients. What had secured position exposes vulnerability. The earlier humiliation scene, and its later echo in the haircut episode, reveal that the field of attention remains volatile. Desire elevates and destabilizes at once. It confers presence and withdraws it without warning.

Rudolph's condition corresponds to this instability in inward form. His attraction to what appears luminous organizes his perception, yet it does not provide a framework capable of sustaining coherence. Guilt persists. It is displaced, not resolved. His movement is directed, but it lacks structure. Bernice, by contrast, acquires technique and operates within a visible field, but her position remains dependent on responses she cannot control. Both cases reveal the same underlying tension: desire directs the self while leaving it exposed.

This condition aligns with Nietzsche's account of a world in which transcendent values lose their binding force and life becomes an act of self-stylization (Nietzsche 1882, 181–182). Fitzgerald's characters inhabit such a world. They pursue intensity, distinction, and visibility. These pursuits organize action and shape perception. At the same time, they remain dependent on conditions that cannot be stabilized.

Fitzgerald's fiction does not present this transformation as liberation. It exposes its cost. The turn toward attraction, visibility, and intensity produces a form of dependence. The self gains direction through desire while losing grounding. It becomes expressive and remains exposed to fluctuation. What appears as autonomy operates within a system governed by response. Identity is sustained through attraction and remains vulnerable to its loss.

## VI. The Cost of Self-Invention

Modern literature is frequently understood as shaped by fragmentation, instability, and the weakening of inherited forms of authority (Bradbury and McFarlane 1976; Berman 1982). Within this condition, the making of the self emerges as a necessary response to unstable worlds, offering individuals a means of constructing coherence and direction. Fitzgerald's fiction participates in this broader modernist concern, but it attends with particular precision to the cost of such construction. His stories bring into focus the pressures placed on the individual once inherited structures lose their force, showing how the self must be fashioned and sustained without stable ground. In both "Absolution" and "Bernice Bobs Her Hair," the making of the self brings movement, visibility, and a



sense of agency, while generating isolation, exposure, and moral disturbance. The self that is fashioned under pressure can act, but it cannot rest. It depends on sustaining an image, and that dependence places the individual in a condition of continual strain.

In “Absolution,” the charge of inventing the self appears first as inward division. Rudolph’s turn toward an imagined identity gives him a way to bear fear and confusion, but it also separates him from any stable sense of wholeness. The narrative registers this separation through a growing awareness that his inner life cannot be aligned with the roles and expectations imposed upon him. His responses become increasingly withdrawn, marked by hesitation, secrecy, and a sense that what he experiences inwardly cannot be expressed within the structures that surround him. This produces a divided condition in which inner experience and outward conduct move along separate tracks. The self does not hold together as a unified presence. It becomes stratified, with an inward domain shaped by imagination and an outward domain governed by convention and surveillance. The construction of the self does not resolve tension. It organizes it. Rudolph constructs an inner space that allows him to endure pressure, while this space isolates him from shared forms of meaning. What sustains him also confines him, leaving him suspended between a private world he must protect and a public world he cannot fully inhabit.

This estrangement deepens through the story’s religious scenes. Confession and communion, which should provide order and assurance, intensify Rudolph’s sense of spiritual and psychological dislocation. The confessional withdraws from communal ritual into a confined exchange marked by tension, secrecy, and fragmentation. It marks a movement away from the stage into what Goffman describes as the back region, where performance is withdrawn, the audience is absent, and the work of impression management cannot secure recognition (Goffman 1959, 112–115). The self is removed from the field of shared visibility and placed within an enclosed interior.

This condition extends beyond the confessional into Rudolph’s ordinary movement through the world. Even in external settings, his inner disturbance becomes visible through bodily unease, strained movement, and a persistent sense of pressure that accompanies his experience. The world does not absorb or contain his condition. It intensifies his separation within it.

The culmination of this process appears in the communion scene, where the collective dimension of ritual dissolves into individual withdrawal. While others remain within a recognizable structure of belief, Rudolph’s experience turns inward and isolates him from that structure. The expense of self-creation is concentrated in this shift. The self that he has begun to construct secures a space of inward control while exposing him to pressure, estrangement, and loss of coherence. What sustains him also confines him, leaving him enclosed within a self that cannot be fully inhabited or shared.

Fitzgerald also connects this cost to fear and bodily pressure. Rudolph’s crisis is registered somatically, through constriction, irregular breathing, and heightened sensitivity to his own physical state. The body becomes the site where anxiety gathers and circulates, giving visible form to what cannot be resolved at the level of belief. Self-formation begins under pressure. It is compelled by a need to endure an environment that cannot contain experience. The imagined figure of Blatchford Sarnemington offers composure, control, and elevation, but its function is compensatory. It organizes experience and leaves its underlying disturbance intact.

The story also makes clear that self-construction exposes Rudolph to continuing instability. Once he begins to live through projection, he depends on sustaining the image that supports him. At a certain point, a decisive inward shift occurs. It carries no visible marker and reshapes the structure of his experience. From this moment onward, consciousness is organized through division, secrecy, and distance. The cost extends beyond immediate anxiety. It establishes a condition that must be maintained. The self becomes dependent on the projection that sustains it, bound to repetition and exposed to collapse, without access to a unified ground.



In “Bernice Bobs Her Hair,” the cost of self-invention appears in a more public and social form. Bernice learns to construct a self that can attract attention, command interest, and circulate successfully within the social world around her. This transformation gives her power, but it also places her inside a system governed by unstable recognition. Her identity becomes dependent on the gaze and response of others, locating her within a field in which visibility determines value and position. As Goffman suggests, performance requires continuous management before an audience whose reactions sustain or unsettle the role (Goffman 1959, 22–25). At a deeper level, this condition corresponds to what Lacan describes as the gaze of the Other, through which the subject comes into being as something seen while remaining dependent on responses that cannot be secured (Lacan 1977, 1–7). Recognition produces presence, but it does not stabilize it.

Within this theatrical structure, Marjorie does not simply provide a role for Bernice to inhabit; she offers a script designed to expose and limit her. Her instruction directs Bernice into a form of performance that reveals inadequacy and secures her subordinate position within the social field. The script is calibrated to hinder, placing Bernice at risk within a space governed by judgment and rapid evaluation. Bernice’s success therefore takes on a different significance. She exceeds the constraints imposed upon her and disrupts the structure that sought to contain her. The performance acquires a force that detaches it from its initial design, altering the distribution of control within the social field.

This success introduces a tension. The performance gains autonomy, but it leaves Bernice without a stable point of identification. The role she performs is learned, adopted, and executed with precision, but it does not arise from an inner conviction she recognizes as her own. The self she enacts responds to external demands, shaped by technique and adjustment, without grounding in a form she has chosen or internalized.

This estrangement is reinforced by the conditions of performance. Bernice does not act among figures she trusts or identifies with, nor within an environment she can claim as her own. The audience remains critical, shifting, and external to her. Even as she succeeds in directing attention and securing approval, that approval does not resolve her position within the social field. It confirms her visibility while leaving her without attachment or belonging.

This tension reaches its most decisive form in the story’s final movement. Bernice’s cutting of Marjorie’s braids functions as an act of reversal. In theatrical terms, Bernice assumes the position of the playwright, composing the scene and enacting it as its central figure. Marjorie is displaced within it, drawn into a role not of her choosing and deprived of initiative. The distribution of agency is reversed.

At the same time, the act departs from the conditions that governed Bernice’s earlier performance. It does not require the immediate presence of an audience. It unfolds outside the space of visible interaction, beyond direct observation and response. In Goffman’s terms, the scene shifts away from the front region of performance into a space where action is not oriented toward real-time impression management (Goffman 1959, 112–115). Despite its dramatic intensity, the act anticipates its reception rather than depending on it. Its consequences are structured to produce a future spectacle. The audience is deferred. Those who encounter the result will respond with shock after the act has been completed.

This displacement reveals both the reach and the limit of her control. Bernice gains authority over the structure of events, but her agency reaches its fullest expression at the point of withdrawal. She exits the scene she has created, leaving its consequences to unfold in her absence. Action becomes possible through departure.

The strain of self-construction becomes visible in this movement. Bernice acquires presence, influence, and control over perception, but she does so within a structure that cannot sustain her inwardly or secure her position within it. The self she constructs can intervene in the order of events, but it cannot remain within them. What appears as mastery is inseparable from exposure and retreat.



The contrast between the two stories clarifies Fitzgerald's larger point. Rudolph's response unfolds inwardly, producing separation and isolation. Bernice's response unfolds within a social field, producing visibility and exposure. The forms differ, but the condition remains shared. In each case, the making of the self depends on processes that cannot secure it, requiring continuous maintenance under unstable conditions.

This burden extends into the structure of relationships. Institutions fail to provide guidance, and interaction follows the logic of attention and response. The self becomes more active, while connection becomes more fragile.

The consequences of this mode of self-formation take shape in the form of life it produces. It enables movement under unstable conditions, but it provides no ground on which the self can rest. Fitzgerald's characters learn to construct themselves while remaining exposed to instability. The self can be made. It cannot be secured.

### **Conclusion: Freedom without Foundations**

Fitzgerald's short fiction brings into sharp focus a central condition of modern identity: the necessity of making the self in a world where inherited authority can no longer secure meaning. "Absolution" and "Bernice Bobs Her Hair" approach this condition through different narrative forms and social settings, but they converge in showing that identity emerges under pressure. In both stories, the self is not discovered as an inner essence or stabilized through external guidance. It is produced through acts of projection, performance, and response.

What gives Fitzgerald's treatment of this condition its distinctive force is his attention to the price of such self-making. In "Absolution," Rudolph's turn inward produces a private structure of imagination that offers coherence while deepening isolation, secrecy, and spiritual dislocation. In "Bernice Bobs Her Hair," Bernice acquires visibility and agency within a social field governed by performance, only to find that recognition depends on unstable audiences, shifting judgments, and roles that cannot be securely inhabited. The self in these stories gains force through construction, but that construction leaves it exposed to fracture.

Fitzgerald thus shows that self-invention is inseparable from dependence. Illusion gives form to desire, performance secures temporary presence, and recognition confers value, but none of these can provide lasting ground. What they offer is movement without settlement, visibility without belonging, action without ethical assurance. The individual becomes capable of shaping a self, while remaining vulnerable to the very structures that make such shaping possible.

This is where Fitzgerald extends a central tension within modern literature with particular clarity. The weakening of traditional authority opens a space for reinvention, but it also transfers the burden of coherence onto the individual. His fiction does not treat this burden as a triumph of freedom. It presents it as a difficult condition in which the self must be continuously sustained without guarantee of stability, unity, or completion.

The force of Fitzgerald's insight lies here. He does not ask whether the self can be invented. In his fiction, it must be. The deeper question is what kind of life follows from that necessity. His answer is unsparring: the invented self can move, act, and appear, but it cannot fully rest in what it has made. Freedom remains possible, but it unfolds without foundations.

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