

Nick as an Unreliable Narrator

Modernism and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

The Modernist Element of The Unreliable Narrator by Christie Camacho

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, addresses several issues of Modernist concern, including but not limited to the development of technology, feminism as represented through the character of Jordan Baker, the effect of World War I upon society, a questioning of God, and the possibility of man's place in a possibly Godless Universe, as seen in George Wilson's reaction to Myrtle's infidelity.

In addition to these Modernistic themes cited by literary theorist Peter Childs, Fitzgerald utilizes the technique of the unreliable narrator to further locate *The Great Gatsby* within the Modernist sensibility.

The Narrator Nick Carraway

Fitzgerald introduces Nick Carraway to the reader through an internal monologue, in which Nick explains how he came to be involved with Jay Gatsby. During this rumination, Nick states that he is "inclined to reserve all judgments." However, his statement is quickly proven false as he immediately begins to relate his strange fascination with Jay Gatsby, despite Gatsby representing everything for which Nick had "unaffected scorn."

Through this comment, the reader discovers that not only does Nick incline himself towards critical comments, his assessments can be heated and harsh. As such, the reader comes to realize that Nick will continue to weave his judgments into the story and that Nick's account of events may not be the manner in which said events occurred. In essence, Fitzgerald has given us our warning and we now must read with caution ...

One Narrator, Multiple Narratives

Fitzgerald also employs the use of the unreliable narrator to explore the concept of the microcosm versus the macrocosm or the small plot versus the large plot. Through Nick's narration, the reader is provided with a story within the story. While the primary focus of *The Great Gatsby* is on the entanglement between Daisy and Jay, there is an individual focus upon Nick, as the reader views the unfolding of events through Nick's eyes.

When Nick is apprised of Jay's feelings for Daisy, and the lengths to which Jay has gone to insinuate himself into Daisy's life, Nick reflects upon his own situation and realizes that he "had no girl whose disembodied face floated along the dark cornices and blinding signs and so I drew up the girl beside me . . ." In essence, the reader becomes subjected to Nick's romantic lamentation in the midst of Jay and Daisy's burgeoning romance.

In this revelation the reader becomes more familiar with Nick's character and his lack of connection to one significant individual (despite the relationship he does not want but continues to sustain with a woman back home). However, through the story development,

the reader finds that Nick has decided to pursue and enjoy what is available to him: Jordan Baker.

Modernism and The Unreliable Narrator

Although there are several examples of Modernist thought and influence in *The Great Gatsby*, Nick's inconsistent behavior and occasionally paradoxical judgments emphasize the contribution of the unreliable narrator to the Modernist narrative. And with this technique, Fitzgerald further emphasizes the way in which Modernism is fascinated "with the way the mind processes or projects a reality which surrounds the individual but which is often alienating and oppressing."

Sources

Childs, Peter. *The New Critical Idiom Series*. London: Routledge, 2000.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: First Collier Books Edition, 1992.

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Structure and Narration in *The Great Gatsby*

Introduction

The Great Gatsby is the third novel of Fitzgerald, published in 1925 after *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and *The Beautiful and the Damned* (1922). It is a turning point in Fitzgerald literary career because it was to improve on his previous works: he tested new techniques and insisted on the novelty of his enterprise: 'I want to write something new, something extraordinary and beautiful and simple and 'intricately patterned' (letter to Perkins, agent at Scribners). Indeed, Fitzgerald devoted a lot of care and attention to **pruning unnecessary passages** and tried to introduce **editing methods** (just like a film-maker) to re-arrange his story in movie sequences.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald's main innovation was to introduce a **first person narrator and protagonist** whose consciousness filters the story's events. This device was not a total invention since a character through whose eyes and mind the central protagonist is discovered is to be found in two of Conrad's books: *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*. As usual with this device, the main protagonist remains strange and shady. This technique reinforces the mystery of the characters. The second advantage is that the mediation of a character-witness permits a **play between the real and the imaginary**. This indirect approach is

inherited from Nathaniel Hawthorne. Hence, it is difficult to distinguish between true representation and fantasizing. For Emerson, vision was more important than the real world.

I. Nick's vision: the 'modified' first person technique

The story is narrated through a 'modified' first person viewpoint:

- it is not the main protagonist (Gatsby) who recounts his own story but a **secondary character, Nick Carraway**, who is successively suspicious, wary and eventually fascinated by Gatsby. Nick is not trustworthy, **not fully reliable**: he oscillates.
- whenever Nick cannot obtain a firsthand version of facts, he does not hesitate to **quote other sources**. For instance, Gatsby's love affair is told by Jordan Baker (chap.4 p80). Nick reports her words but the problem is that she is said to be a liar: how far can she be trusted?
- Nick is obliged to reconstruct an event through the **collage of different testimonies**. Nick uses his logical mind to come up with a definitive story, result of words that have been filtered by different minds.

That is why this first person viewpoint is modified: Nick can only rely on what he has been told.

II. Nick Carraway: a privileged witness

Nick is not a random choice, it is very well calculated. He was the best possible witness to let the reader discover Gatsby. Indeed, through coincidence, he happens to be Gatsby's next-door neighbour (p11). Besides, Nick has not vested interest in hobnobbing Gatsby. He has no axe to grind. Yet, without being acquainted with Gatsby, Nick is nonetheless a relative of Daisy and consequently introduced to the Buchanans and to Gatsby's story.

A. An eye-witness account

Nick witnesses some of the events of Gatsby's last summer and sometimes participates in them. He has two functions: seeing and acting. The emphasis is put on visual perception. The act of seeing creates mystery instead of providing information. A lot about Gatsby's life is bound to remain unfathomable: there is more in Gatsby's life than Nick's eyes can meet. Nick's scope of vision is limited. Yet, Nick is a good observer and can draw his own conclusions. He can analyse Gatsby's facial expressions and put a meaning on his gestures. See chapter 5 with the re-union between Gatsby and Daisy. He is sometimes over-informed. When Gatsby dashes into the kitchen, Nick is made privy of his companion's feelings. Through Nick's agency, the reader is provided with the real feelings of Gatsby: *'this is a terrible mistake'*. This tends to suggest that Fitzgerald tried to favour the sentimental dimension of his character at the expense of his 'business'.

B. The accounts of other people

Nick picks up most information about Gatsby and Daisy through other people's accounts - mainly gossip and public rumours. The accounts repeated may be unreliable and called into question. Through the gossip of the beginning, Gatsby is almost all the time presented with a mixture of awe and dread, making of him an outsider. Nick is just echoing: '*German spy during the war*', '*he killed a man once*'. Nick almost believes it: '*he looked as if he had killed a man*'. Nick has a varying attitude towards Gatsby. He passes on to the reader a lot of rumours which might prove later to be contradictory. Nick plays the role of the chorus in Ancient tragedy and is the link between the reader and Gatsby.

C. Nick's reconstruction of events

Nick is a self-conscious narrator; he is aware of the difficulties of writing a report that would approach the truth. He uses his critical judgement to form an opinion not only on the events but on himself writing these events. For instance, p62: '*reading over what I have written so far, I've given the impression that the events of three nights several weeks apart were all that absorbed me*'.

There is a sense in which the *The Great Gatsby* would concern Nick. Through the events of the summer of 1922 and his writing, Nick has changed. When he is involved in the action, he is a belated adolescent but he is an adult when writing back after two years. Chap7: '*I was 30. Before me stretched the portent menacing road of a new decade*' (p142). In a way, he has gained knowledge, passing from innocence to the consciousness of the complexity of the world.

III. Nick Carraway: an unreliable narrator

All the characters are not depicted with the same clarity. Those described with most lucidity are those for whom Nick feels indifferent: Catherine, Myrtle Wilson and Mc Kee. In contrast, the closer the characters get to Nick and the more blurred they prove to be: Gatsby and Daisy, as if Nick was afraid to jump to conclusions concerning Gatsby. Because Nick participates vicariously in Gatsby's adventures, he finds it difficult to come to a clear cut picture of the man.

A. Nick's subjective account

Nick is unreliable: he has a romantic turn of mind pushing him to idealize certain characters. He is bewitched by Daisy's voice, which he compared to a nightingale. He is in love with Daisy himself but remains aware of her selfishness and is not shocked by her carelessness.

Nick is influenced by his upbringing in the Mid West and stands for certain moral principles: '*I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known*' (p66). He is a prig, smug and self-righteous Mid Westerner. He is spineless (not very brave) and easily influenced. He is lured to the glittering false world of appearances. Nick is like all men looking for glory and high hopes (dream of making lots of money in a short while) provided they find out how it is possible. We cannot expect Nick to be totally objective -he is taken in by all those fake appearances.

B. Nick's distorted vision

Fitzgerald's novel emphasizes the difficulties of getting a clear picture of reality and it also underscores the impossibility of adjusting one's eyes to obtain a faithful reflection of the 'outside world'. From Dr Eckleburg's gigantic spectacles on the advertisement to the Owl-Eyed man's thick glasses, the eyesight is a recurrent motif, a metonymic allusion to the possibility of getting a distorted representation of reality.

It is often suggested that Nick is unable to get a clear picture of whatever goes on. Myrtle's party in Chapter 3 offers a good example of the narrator's distorted vision. There are several instances of misperceptions. First Nick does not see properly an over-enlarged photograph because he is standing too close to it: he sees 'a lion sitting on a blurred rock' but then taking a few steps backwards the sight changes into 'a bonnet, and the countenance of a stout old lady'. The lesson could not be clearer; namely it is indispensable for the narrator to bring the 'outside reality' into focus. Indeed Nick's vision is too often distorted either because he is over drunk: 'everything that happened had a dim, hazy cast over it...the whisky distorted things.'(chap2, p35) or because he is in a dream-like state: half awake, half asleep as if sedated: 'I think I walked into a deep sleep as I entered my front door' (90).

Nick is also haunted by nightmarish visions. After the scene of the accident, in chapter nine he tells a fantastic dream reminiscent of a painting by El Greco (p183), which duplicates through its odd, baroque and surreal aspect the scene in chapter 3 at the end of Gatsby's party when a car loses a wheel. (p61)

C. Nick's own process of initiation

Even if Gatsby is the novel's main protagonist, the novel bears witness to the process of initiation undergone by Nick. Gatsby, after all, does not change in the course of the story; he is and remains a static figure until the very end before being murdered when it finally dawns upon him that the Daisy he worshipped was no more than an illusory creation. On the opposite Nick goes through different stages as he tells the story. Nick's viewpoint evolves and his changing outlook bestows a further dimension on the novel.

First Nick overcomes his moral *prejudices and* strikes up a personal relationship with Gatsby (chap. 4). He stops being a Middle West prig with too simple a notion of right and wrong. Then he is given access to Gatsby's past and Gatsby's love quest; he is thus made alive to the power of illusion: 'the unreality of reality' (p106) to give life a sense of purpose. Nick, it should not be forgotten, had up until the novel's beginning, led an aimless existence, he was unmotivated by his work as a bondman and used to let himself be carried along by events. In this respect his encounter with Gatsby proves a decisive step forward.

With Gatsby's death, Nick is made aware of the barrenness and sterility of the East, of a world that is 'material without being real'. As Gatsby's former acquaintances each in their turn find an excuse for not attending his funeral, Nick realizes that the spree has ended once and for all. The show is over and the actors have made their exits. Nick's process of initiation ends with his sudden realization that his fascination for a gleaming, dazzling East was unfounded. After Gatsby's death there remains nothing in the East but void and emptiness: the only music and laughter that Nick can hear are imaginary, hallucinatory: 'I spent my Saturday nights in New York because those gleaming, dazzling parties of his were with me so vividly that I could still hear the music and the laughter' (p187).

Conclusion

The introduction of a first-person narrator who reflects the main protagonist's personality is the best way to conjure up a sense of mystery that cannot be solved. When all has been said and done the fact is that Gatsby remains elusive, indiscernible and unfathomable. Therefore the character's myth is never ever broken up.

Nick's encounter with Gatsby is a decisive step in the narrator's progress towards adulthood. Writing retrospectively this biographical fragment is for Nick one way of consolidating his adulthood. Ultimately the memory of Gatsby is the only treasured possession that Nick may bang back to his native Mid West.

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