

To what extent is Nick a reliable narrator in *The Great Gatsby*?

Essay sample

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



**ASSIGN
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To what extent is the character Nick a reliable narrator in the book 'The Great Gatsby'? Nick is a person with a number of contrasting allegiances within the book. For example he finds connections between himself and Gatsby, both serving in the War and that they both come from the 'Mid-West'. However, Nick is also connected to the Buchannans: he is Daisy's cousin, he comes from a wealthy background and he went to the same college as Tom Buchanan. Also, Nick says that his father told him to remember that "not everyone has had the advantages you've had" which tells us that Nick does not discriminate against people from other backgrounds and classes. All in all, these bits of personal information make the reader think of Nick as a well rounded, non-judgemental character. Nick also tells the reader that people tend to confide in him and that he was privy to secrets of "wild, unknown men". The fact that these men are "unknown" suggests both that Nick is a very trustworthy man and therefore people who are "unknown" to him feel they can trust him, it also shows how Nick still refers to them as "unknown" men showing that he is indeed trustworthy and keeps their identity a secret.

Not only is he trustworthy but he also informs us that he is not quick to judge and that he is inclined to "reserve all judgements". The word "reserve" suggests that although at first he may not judge a person he keeps his opinions in waiting to use when they suit him, this shows the reader that although he may not be quick to judge he isn't completely objective. As well as seeming to be less judgemental than most people he shows us, at the McKees' party, he has the ability to refrain from affecting the natural course of events telling us that he was "within and without". This is a metaphor

representing his involvement in telling the story, when he is “within” he is the character and takes part in events but when he is “without” he becomes the narrator, thus showing the reader that he can stop himself from changing the course of the events. Another moment that shows Nick as reliable is when he is approached by a man in the street asking for “directions to West Egg village”.

By being asked for these “directions” Nick feels like a “guide” this makes the reader perceive Nick as a guide through the story, showing us true and taking us the right way through the plot. However Nick is not always the source of reliable insights that he may seem to be. Nick says that he is “honest”. However this is proven to be untrue throughout the book with his deceitful actions. For example he arranges the meeting between Gatsby and Daisy and tells Daisy “not to tell Tom”. The fact that he tells Daisy not to tell Tom shows that Nick knows the wrong of his actions; it also shows to the reader that Nick chooses to keep information from who he chooses and therefore possibly shouldn't be trusted. This counter proves his theory about being “one of the few honest men” that he knows and providing the reader with doubt about his reliability. Nick is also a modified first person narrator, this means that although Nick can only rely on what he is told, he still speculates about other characters feelings and turns his thoughts into fact. This is shown when Daisy attends one of Gatsby's parties and despite the fact she says she is enjoying herself, Nick claims “she was appalled”.

The way he states that “she was” shows how Nick believes that his opinion is the truth and therefore it is not to be argued with, hence why he doesn't

say that she might've been appalled. We also realise that Nick is also a self narrator "now I want to go back a little". This Shows that he self-consciously manipulates the narrative to reflect his own agenda, which in this case is the telling of how Wilson killed Gatsby, however Nick includes it here to make his story more powerful. Not only does Nick use information at convenient places during his story but also censors it. While on Gatsby's steps he sees and "erases" an "obscene word". Fitzgerald uses "erases" as it suggests the removal of a mistake which, in Nick's mind, this "obscene word" is, not only this but it also suggests Nick's complete power over information in the story as he can so easily "erase" it from the story. Nick sometimes fractures the narrative during the book when recounting "One day in October nineteen-seventeen- (said Jordan Baker that afternoon...)".

Fitzgerald constructs the language so Nick adds his own comments to show the reader that although the story may be one from someone else, Nick is still the narrator and completely in control and feels the need to remind the reader of this fact. Not only does he recant stories in his own way but he also 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 rumors which might prove later to be contradictory.

At the end of the novel Nick seems to have matured as a narrator when he speaks of Tom and Daisy's "vast carelessness" and is shown to have realised the hypocritical world he was once part of is nothing but a great sham and we hold some hope that he may leave this behind, thus showing his maturing into a reliable narrator. However Nick states that we cannot help but being "born back ceaselessly into the past". This is a metaphor representing Gatsby's struggle and the American dream itself, it shows that despite a person's optimism and perseverance their energy is spent chasing a goal which they never achieve just like Gatsby with Daisy. This is the moment when the reader realises Nick has been changed by his time on the East Coast and perhaps he has matured enough to be considered reliable.

Word count: 1, 082