

Role of narration in the great gatsby

Literature, American Literature



Renowned author F. Scott Fitzgerald became “ the most famous chronicler of 1920s America, an era that he dubbed ‘ the Jazz Age.’” (Phillips 1). His fame grew in part from his widely published short stories, and also from the art of his novel, *The Great Gatsby*. Although the central character of the novel is Jay Gatsby, Gatsby does not tell his story himself, nor does an omniscient narrator. Fitzgerald uses Nick Carraway, who appears to be an innocent bystander chronicling the events of Gatsby’s summer, to play an integral role in the narrative. Although he is essentially a minor character, Carraway’s unique role as narrator and confidante establishes the mood, develops rounder characters, and illuminates the novel’s themes. Fitzgerald’s daring choice to speak through Carraway, a character that is within, yet distanced from the main story provides a powerful mechanism for establishing the mood for *The Great Gatsby*. In the opening pages of the novel, as Carraway struggles to establish his credibility, he informs the reader that he is “ inclined to reserve all judgments” (Fitzgerald 1). However, the reader soon learns that the opposite is true: Carraway scarcely hesitates in unleashing harsh judgment toward acquaintances, for he admits that “...[His tolerance] has a limit” (2). Although the reader detects pomposity in his attitude, Carraway’s admissions give the reader what the critic Linda Daley describes as “ an even-handed insight to the story” (1). Thus, Carraway’s narrative provides a balance of reservation and revelation. Furthermore, as Carraway begins to reveal the details of plot, the mood evolves into that of a documentary, which reflects Fitzgerald’s tendency toward realism. Scott Donaldson writes, “ Carraway’s presence on the scene is acceptable[,]” yet the reader “ does not find the scene so alien and forbidding” (109). The

reader can clearly see and understand Carraway's descriptions while accepting them as truth without poignant exaggerations. For example, he morbidly describes Myrtle Wilson's death, ". . . [H]er left breast was swinging loose like a flap, and there was no need to listen for the heart beneath" (Fitzgerald 138). Through the narration of Carraway, Fitzgerald establishes a mood that the reader observes in non-fictional chronologies; one that captures the reality of the novel's thematic elements. Fitzgerald also uses his narrator to construct a mood of mystery surrounding his characters.

Although Carraway recounts the events of one summer, he reports the events in a seemingly random way. In the novel, Carraway admits, ". . . I have given the impression that the events of three nights several weeks apart were . . . [more than] . . . merely casual events " (56). Fitzgerald uses the random reports by having Carraway release the details of Gatsby's past before the actual time that he learns of them. Thus, Fitzgerald not only keeps the reader interested in the plot by releasing details prior to the events which lead to their revelation, but also this use of narration illustrates the themes surrounding Gatsby's character without the reader having to guess about his past. Fitzgerald uses Carraway to establish both realism and mystery within his narrative. Carraway's narration also serves to create rounder characters that fully execute the role Fitzgerald has designed.

Initially, Carraway introduces Gatsby as a kindred to himself. He notes that both he and Gatsby grew up as a member of the Midwest's traditional middle class, left home to travel east, and became integrated in the upper class society; however, the one contrasting characteristic of each is the way in which each handles romantic relationships. Carraway displays a pattern of

evasion from any profound emotional relationships. When he leaves his home to move east, he is escaping involvement with a young woman because she perspired while playing tennis, he cuts short an affair with a girl because his brother shot him mean looks, and he sees Jordan Baker for no apparent reason (Donaldson 106). Gatsby, on the contrary, will do anything to attain and retain his former love, Daisy Buchanan, whom he had loved five years prior to the novel's beginning. From Jordan Baker Carraway learns that "Gatsby bought [his] house so that Daisy would be just across the bay" (Fitzgerald 79). Carraway effectively foils Gatsby's drive and yearning to attain his dream, Daisy, for as Carraway drives his love interests away or moves away from them, Gatsby moves closer to his "green light . . . [at] the end of the dock" (22). This ostensibly minor foil later grows into an important theme concerning the corruption and disillusionment that has occurred surrounding the American dream of the 1920s. Carraway also furthers the development of minor characters. One important aspect of character revealed through Carraway is society's perception of the character. When Carraway efficiently reveals the nature of "lesser" characters, he mirrors the perception of society. For example, Carraway describes Meyer Wolfsheim as "[a] small, flat-nosed Jew" (69). Donaldson further explains, "With the lower orders Nick is still less charitable. Sentence is passed rapidly on minor characters . . . Catherine is disposed of in a paragraph" (Donaldson 105). Such "sentencing" and disposal is like that of a jury and reveals the way "civilized" upper class society passes judgment on individuals of a different social order. Finally, Carraway's narration has the distinctive ability to tie characters together. His narrative style allows him to tell the story of Tom

and Myrtle Wilson, Tom's lover, while simultaneously telling the story of Gatsby and Daisy's romantic affair. He strategically " goes back a little and tell[s] what happen[s]" (Fitzgerald 156) in an order that deftly handles " the story of Gatsby and the story of Myrtle Wilson, parallel characters who share parallel dreams and parallel fates. . . . Assuredly it was a stroke of narrative genius which found the resolution of the two narrative strands" (Lid 167). Through the parallel strands of character development, the reader can see the similarities in the situation; therefore, Fitzgerald's characters come even more alive to the reader. Carraway's narration promotes the rounder characters that make *The Great Gatsby* notable. Another important quality Carraway's narration brings is the ability to paint an amplified theme. Carraway's narration illuminates the theme by eluding emotional attachment between the reader and characters. Because the reader views each character through Carraway's eyes, he is limited to the extent of Carraway's emotions. However, Carraway admits that he views social interaction as " a trick of some sort to extract a contributory emotion from me" (18). This lack of emotional attachment frees the reader " from a blinding sense of identity with any one character" and allows Fitzgerald " to curb and express his personal passion" (Lid 171). This remarkable narrative form allows for the reader to see the disillusionment surrounding Fitzgerald's own times. Carraway's narration not only allows for clear themes, but also directly reflects society's views of individuals, consequently establishing a separate, independent theme of class struggle. In the beginning of the novel, Carraway establishes himself as a part of the traditionally advantageous social class. He is an alumnus of Yale University and often mingles with the *Nuevo Riche*.

His sarcastic depiction of the class of people who attend Gatsby's parties is degrading, and thus parallels society's conflict between the upwardly mobile class of Nuevo Riche and that of old money (Fitzgerald 61-63). In effect, through Carraway's perceptions, Fitzgerald exposes the duality of the lifestyles of moneyed America in the 1920s. Foremost, Fitzgerald uses Carraway's narration analogously to the theme as a whole. R. W. Lid notes, "Fitzgerald's narrator not merely records the events of the novel, but also embodies the meaning of the experiences he witnesses" (168). Lid alludes to Carraway's personal moral growth at the end of the novel after Gatsby's death. As Carraway grows closer to Gatsby through the course of the novel, he begins to accept, and later respect, Gatsby's dream of attaining Daisy Buchanan. When Gatsby dies, Nick accepts Gatsby's dream for its innate passion. Carraway explains, "[Gatsby's dream alluded us [Gatsby and I] then, but that's no matter- tomorrow we [Gatsby and I] will run faster . . .]" (Fitzgerald 182). This acceptance of collaboration with Gatsby symbolizes the greatness of the dream itself. Most importantly, however, is the fact that Carraway, while accepting the value of the dream, rejects the deteriorating morals that surround that dream. Carraway condemns Gatsby's illegal bootlegging, for his reasoning for fleeing the East is that he "want[s] the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever" (2). This longing for moral order allows Fitzgerald to speak through Carraway (Phillips 1) and display the theme of how the American dream, symbolized in Gatsby's dream of attaining Daisy, has been corrupted by the pursuit of riches. Fitzgerald's resolution to this corruption parallels Carraway's moral progression and ultimate decision to reject the immoral society that the

valley of ashes symbolizes (Lid 1). In effect, Carraway embodies all of the “greatness” of Gatsby without the moral faults and corruption (Lynn 162). Carraway projects the themes of the disillusionment of the American dream, the duality of moneyed America in the 1920s, and the corruption that such money brings. Albeit Carraway’s own story does not spotlight his personal role, Fitzgerald clearly uses his narrator to evoke a suitable mood, expand characters, and perfectly reveal themes. Carraway provides the reader with an excellent example of how a writer can seize inconsequential characters and make them essential. The Great Gatsby owes a large share of its esteem to the narrative workings of the minor character Nick Carraway. Works Cited Daley, Linda. “Nick, the Flawed Narrator.” “The Great Gatsby” Online Resource. 2002. Online. Available <http://gatsby.cjb.net/>. 24 March 2002. Donaldson, Scott. “The Trouble with Nick..” Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby.” (1984): n. pag. Rpt. in Readings on F. Scott Fitzgerald. Eds. David Bender, et al. San Diego: Greenhaven, 1998. 103-11. Fitzgerald, F. Scott. The Great Gatsby. New York: Scribner’s, 1925. Lid, R. W. “Fitzgerald’s Remarkable Narrative Art.” Fitzgerald/Hemingway Annual (1970): n. pag. Rpt. in Readings on: “The Great Gatsby.” Ed. Bruno Leone, et al. San Diego: Greenhaven, 1998. 163-71. Lynn, David H. “Creating a Creator.” The Hero’s Tale: Narrators in the Early Modern Novel. (1989): n. pag. Rpt. in Readings on: “The Great Gatsby.” Ed. Bruno Leone, et al. San Diego: Greenhaven, 1998. 154-162.]