

An analysis of the role of the narrator in the great gatsby



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life”(p.

28). Thus Nick Carraway, the intriguing narrator of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, describes the position he has in the novel. His description relates much of how Nick narrates the book, both with a stranger's impartial view, and the inevitable subjectivity of somebody involved. An understanding of Nick's character is essential for comprehending the way *The Great Gatsby* is narrated. Nick is the hard-working, virtuous and socially reserved pioneer from the west who “ decided to go East and learn the bond-business”(p.

). The son of “ well-to-do people”(p. 2), he has preserved the moral values of a family who might just be descended from the “ Dukes of Buccleuch”(p. 2). Although not wealthy, Nick is noble and well-mannered, his thoughts and actions well-anchored in a consistent set of beliefs. He is also reserved, and sincere in an inobtrusive way.

On the isles of New York, where “ white palaces(...) glittered across the water”(p.

4), and where wild parties are attended by the “ staid nobility of the countryside”(p. 35), Nick interacts with the other people but is always casually observing and registering. So, he is both “ within and without”. This way, this “ single man...

looking purposeless and alone”(p. 33) suits perfectly the role of retelling the story, as he, in spite of his experience from the inside, is able to keep himself

from being drawn into the events emotionally. Even at Gatsby's wild parties does he remain at the edge of events, not dancing nor mingling with the unknown guests; nevertheless Fitzgerald is able to, through Nick's eyes, convey the dreamlike party atmosphere, with "floating rounds of cocktails"(p. 32) and a "sea-change of faces and...

colours"(p. 32). It is much thanks to his narrator's lack of self-identification with the materialistic universe of East and West Egg that Fitzgerald is able to let this world reveal itself to us mostly undistorted. Nick's detachment from the New York life as well as his down-to-earth and unostentatious personality, attract attention.

The use of a narrator who is also one of the characters in a novel often limits the access to the other characters, but by giving Nick the personal qualities mentioned above, Fitzgerald is to some extent able to by-pass this obstacle. By standing out as a third party, seemingly indifferent as to the intrigues and conflicts between the characters, Nick attracts people to confide in him. Even Tom Buchanan's mistress Myrtle, a wild stranger to Nick, unprompted tells him "the story of her first meeting with Tom"(p. 28). Nick's virtue of refraining from premature judgement and alliance allows us to take part in the secrets of both the protagonist and the antagonists of the novel. At her first meeting with Nick since his return from the war, Daisy imparts that after having given birth to a girl and Tom "was God knows where"(p.

14), she "woke up out of ether with an utterly abandoned feeling... and wept"(p. 14).

Tom, in his turn, tells Nick in the end of the novel that he had “cried like a baby”(p. 147) over the death of Myrtle. Not even Gatsby, who spins a web of untruths and legends around himself, is able to, as time goes by, resist from disclosing some true facts about himself for Nick. However, in some cases Nick does not suffice as narrator, and Fitzgerald has to resort to other narrative techniques. On some occasions, the author enters directly into the minds and emotions of the other characters.

The most obvious example is when Jordan relates to Nick Daisy's and Gatsby's shared past. Here, the story shifts to be told from Jordan's perspective. To indicate that this passage is more than a simple part of a dialogue between her and Nick, Fitzgerald omits the inverted commas. Although Nick remains the narrator, he is in a way forgotten and expelled to the background by this small detail, which makes focus be put on Jordan. In some other parts of the novel third-person narration is used.

Several of these passages take place under the “giant eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg”(p. 99).

The chief role of T. J. Eckleburg – a pair of spectacle-decorated eyes on a crumbling advertisement board – is however not simply to compensate for Nick's absence or insufficiency in certain scenes, but rather to symbolize God's diminishing importance in our world. Impudent acts of adultery, greed and jealousy, as well as a hit-and-run accident, take place right under the brooding eyes of the advertisement board. At one point, Wilson says “God sees everything”, but the complete disregard by the novel's characters for the tattered advertisement lets us understand that God is dead.

There is hence more to Fitzgerald's changing of narrator than simply an occasional technical need to replace Nick. It is interesting then to speculate why Nick has been chosen to be the main narrator, since a third-person narrator could indeed have replaced him. The answer might be that, for one, Nick's noble backgrounds and academic and classy education, allows for elaborate language, suitable for describing the upper-class and sophisticated life the reader meets in New York, to be used. Imagine, for example, if Wilson had been the narrator. Fitzgerald could in that case hardly have used the same elaborate language, and thus much of the novel's atmosphere would have been lost.

The second, and more important, reason is that Nick appears in the novel as the only one capable of appreciating Gatsby's dedication to an "incorruptible dream"(p. 26). When Daisy and Gatsby meet in Nick's cabin, the narrator's attention is set on Gatsby, who is told to be glowing: "without a word or gesture of exultation a new well-being radiated from him and filled the little room"(p. 72).

Nick also describes Gatsby's "illusion" as having a "colossal vitality"(p. 78). In the end of the novel we learn that Nick's attraction to this illusory dedication has grown into an affinity for Gatsby when Nick shouts to him: "They're a rotten crowd... You're worth the whole damn bunch put together"(p.

26). This affinity for Gatsby gives, on the other hand, reason for asking whether Nick is really a reliable narrator. Clearly his praise of Gatsby does not conform to the vow "to reserve all judgement" which Nick took earlier

on in his life. However, we have seen that Nick remains mostly impartial in his relation to the other characters. Even Jordan Baker, who he seems in love with, he is able to criticize, calling her “ incurably dishonest”(p.

47). He even describes Gatsby as “ faded”(p. 2), and says that his “ elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd”(p. 39). It is of course difficult to affirm that Nick’s account should be free from bias, since we have no other source of information to compare it with.

Regardless, his almost purely descriptive vocabulary, and the fact that each of the other main, and antagonizing, characters – Tom, Daisy and Gatsby – lay claim to him, regarding him as liable to support their cause, point to Nick truly being a neutral third-party. What can be said, on the other hand, is that Nick disapproves generally of the life-style of Tom, Daisy and Gatsby. These characters incarnate to some extent the desire for materialistic wealth “ for which [Nick has] an unaffected scorn”(p. 2). Nick’s early statements of, and hints at, distaste for this life-style, lets us suspect that the story in this sense is told from an angle of subjectivity. This additional aspect gives further strength to the idea that Fitzgerald uses the mid-westerner Carraway as a narrator with several different purposes.

Besides having a personality and education that allow Fitzgerald to use elaborate language, being objective, and appreciating Gatsby’s dream, Nick is also the communicator of the author’s critique of post-war “ flapper” America. In conclusion, Nick is an unallied, yet not altogether impartial, third party who is devoted to “ reserve all judgement”(p. 1) of other people.

Moreover, his middle-western background and dispassion for materialistic

wealth make him a suitable recounter of the prodigal life he encounters in New York, and to which he is naturally foreign.

When Fitzgerald relieves Nick of his role as narrator and recounts the story from different points of view, he does it with a purpose, or to some extent simply because Nick becomes insufficient. The main qualities of Nick, which in every other part make him essential for bringing forth certain of the author's messages, are his bourgeois background, his appreciation for Gatsby's profound and pure dedication to a dream and his critique of the lack of spirituality in the American twenties.