

Nick Carraway as an unreliable narrator essay sample

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



In the following essay, Cartwright discusses ways in which Nick Carraway is sometimes a confused or misleading narrator.] While I have met individuals whom I might describe as more Gatsby than Carraway, I have seldom met a critic I would so describe. As critics, we seem to cherish our disillusionment.

Indeed, serious interest in *The Great Gatsby*, according to Richard Foster, was launched by a generation of neoclassical and formalist critics who tended to believe in the final, tough truth of existence imaged in the thinning possibility and thinning joy of Nick's lugubrious moral retreat. As a consequence, traditional estimates of *The Great Gatsby* have grown up around the dual assumptions that Nick speaks for his author and that the novel's mission is an essentially straightforward criticism of the American Dream. ¹ Furthermore, because something about Nick's "midwesternism" seems deeply personal to Fitzgerald, critics have tended not to distinguish between either the narrator and his author or the narrator and his novel. Nick's vision, however, is not identical to Fitzgerald's, or at least to the novel's, for Nick is capable of being an unreliable narrator at moments that are crucial to the story's development.

Indeed, in exactly the same ways that Nick may be a flawed character, he is also sometimes a confused, misleading, or inaccurate teller of his tale. In the last two decades, critical acceptance of Nick's judgments has yielded to some disenchantment with the narrator and his moral actions. His detractors have described him variously (and perhaps excessively) as a defunct archpriest, panderer, prig, spiritual bankrupt, hypocrite, and "moral eunuch"-a man capable of neither assertive action nor self-knowledge. ²

Even those congenial to Carraway's views speak of his "inhibitions and lack of boldness," his failure of self-awareness, and his fear of commitment. To many readers, moreover, the hopelessness of Nick's final vision seems somehow to betray his story. ³ Part of that dissatisfaction arises from Nick's moral withdrawal to the Middle West of his past, while a related response argues that the dream lives beyond Gatsby's death and that a "gleam of hope" is left the reader at the end, a hope perhaps inspired by the very limitations of Nick's consciousness. ⁴ Recent critics, that is, have begun to see Gatsby's story differently from the way Nick would have us see it.

To pose such possibilities, however, is to tamper with accepted notions about the novel's integrity, for some defenders of Nick have argued that "the book makes no sense—if Carraway is repudiated." ⁵ Yet the limitations of Nick's character do have narrative consequences, for Nick sometimes sees only part of a meaning that a scene carries, sometimes shifts ground perplexingly, and sometimes even strains "judgments" out of inconclusive evidence. To accuse Nick of such faults might sound idiosyncratic and even churlish. After all, Nick is the novel's lone moral consciousness; only he sees the richness of meaning—the ineffable dream and its foul wake—in the events on Long Island that summer. But some readers argue that Nick's vision is "limited" and that Fitzgerald intended no simple identification either between the narrator and himself or the narrator and his reader; others have begun to discover differing, sometimes conflicting narrative "voices" in Nick. ⁶ In addition, Nick develops a peculiar rigidity during the course of the novel.

Concurrently, as Nick reveals a growing determination to perceive events in a fixed way, his flights of responsive imagination diminish. After chapter 6 the novel darkens. One explanation for this is that the romantic and mythic context gives way to the social and economic. ⁷ The darkening tone, then, proceeds in part from Nick's evolving consciousness, a staking out of his moral terrain of lost possibility. The two narrative movements are simultaneous: Nick's emerging weaknesses as a narrator parallel his progressively constricted vision, as if the truths Nick affirms are not exactly the truths of his fable. Nick's final disillusionment, that is, derives as much from his own moral dimness, his passivity, and his exaggerated gentility as it does from the facts of Gatsby's life; correspondingly, those qualities sometimes compromise the narration, altering, even from moment to moment, the response—empathy or removal, acceptance or doubt—that his telling draws from the reader. Such a view of Nick's weaknesses must challenge the traditional assumption that Nick generally doubles for Fitzgerald.

It might, indeed, reveal that Nick's closing asceticism is more a preference than an imperative, that his assessment of the dream is not conclusive, and that the novel is far more open-ended than some critics have suggested. Almost from the beginning, the narration invites readers to feel subtle distinctions between representation and explanation. This divergence is a characteristic of the novel's narrative style and is repeated variously throughout the story. The technique has the advantage of economy; it gives readers two types of impressions: one created through descriptions of

places, things, and events, and another created by Nick's responses and reflections. The pattern exhibits itself, for example, in Daisy's story of the butler's nose and her comparison of Nick to an absolute rose. "I'll tell you a family secret," she whispered enthusiastically. "It's about the butler's nose. Do you want to hear about the butler's nose? ... Well, he wasn't always a butler; he used to be the silver polisher for some people in New York that had a silver service for two hundred people.

He had to polish it from morning till night, until finally it began to affect his nose." "I love to see you at my table, Nick. You remind me of a—of a rose, an absolute rose. Doesn't he?" She turned to Miss Baker for confirmation: "An absolute rose?"⁸ In the first instance, Daisy's anecdote is trivial and insipid, clearly anticlimactic to the preparation she makes; in the second her comparison is ridiculous and insincere, camouflaging her real preoccupation. But in both cases, Nick is captivated by Daisy's vibrant beauty: "For a moment the last sunshine fell with romantic affection upon her glowing face; her voice compelled me forward breathlessly as I listened" (14); "She was only extemporizing, but a stirring warmth flowed from her, as if her heart was trying to come out to you concealed in one of those breathless, thrilling words" (15). In each example, the narration creates two effects, the first through the structure of incidents—such as the thrown napkin and abrupt departure with which Daisy disposes of her interest in absolute roses—and the second through Nick's mesmerization before her shining face and the feverish modulations of her voice.

But the two effects judge Daisy oppositely: the one with distance, the other with engagement. This is not to say that Nick fails to recognize that Daisy is as childish as she is womanly, rather that the response he emphasizes reveals only one-half the way the scene dramatizes her. To acknowledge such distinctions is already to put the reader at some critical remove from the narrator. An example of Nick's inordinate responses occurs in chapter 4 during his automobile ride with Gatsby to New York (64-69). Fitzgerald's aim in this scene is to create that ambivalence fundamental to the novel by deepening our fascination with the mystery of Gatsby, even though Gatsby teeters on the edge of the ridiculous. One technique Fitzgerald employs is to preserve a kernel of actual or even metaphoric truth in each of Gatsby's falsehoods: he was educated, at least for a few months, at Oxford; he did inherit a "good deal of money" from his spiritual father, Dan Cody, though he was cheated of it; he was a genuine war hero, even if a copy of Sergeant York.

Another, more subtle technique is to distance the reader from Carraway's judgment, just as Nick is distanced from Gatsby. Through the episode we see Nick's initial, cool skepticism toppling before his sensual imagination-responses disproportionate in either extreme-which leave the reader's more balanced impressions at odds with the narrator's. Indeed, we are left reacting to Nick's reactions, a condition which not only insulates Gatsby but also evokes his power. During the journey Fitzgerald calls our attention repeatedly to Nick's filtering lens. We begin pointedly with Nick's aesthetic intellectualism, his "disappointment" that Gatsby "had little to say" and the

arch dismissal of him as “ simply the proprietor of an elaborate road-house next door” (64). Yet juxtaposed against this wry boredom is the promise of surprise: “ And then came that disconcerting ride” (65).

Thus, Fitzgerald sets the drama of the scene in the dialectics of Nick’s response. Nick rapidly demonstrates a repertoire of judicious responses: his strained sensitivity at Gatsby’s overtness, “ A little overwhelmed, I began the generalized evasions which that question deserves” (65); his fine ear for the false note as Gatsby stumbles, or chokes, over “ educated at Oxford. ... And with this doubt his whole statement fell to pieces, and I wondered if there wasn’t tion deserves” (65); his fine ear for the false note as Gatsby stum- something a little sinister about him, after all” (65); and his discreet confirming of his own instincts as he asks Gatsby in what part of the Middle West he grew up and is answered ““ San Francisco.” Nick’s power of lucid assessment is in full display. Carraway’s vision of Gatsby now becomes more subtle and extreme. When Gatsby recalls the “ sudden extinction” of his clan, Nick responds, “ For a moment I suspected that he was pulling my leg, but a glance at him convinced me otherwise” (66).

Nick momentarily suspects Gatsby of an irony of which the observer is capable but the observed incapable, though Nick’s glance leaves unsettled whether he thinks Gatsby means what he says or not. Gatsby’s next image of himself, as a young, sad rajah in the capitals of Europe, tickles Nick with literary hilarity: “ With an effort I managed to restrain my incredulous laughter. The very phrases were worn so threadbare that they evoked no image except that of a turbaned ‘ character’ leaking sawdust at every pore

as he pursued a tiger through the Bois de Boulogne" (66). Nick reacts in the full possession of his worldliness, distancing the reader with him, as he caricatures Gatsby's tale into a pastiche of incongruent clichés. And at just that moment of assurance, Nick trips unknowingly over his own learned responses. Gatsby tells his story of the Argonne Forest: " We stayed there two days and two nights, a hundred and thirty men with sixteen Lewis guns, and when the infantry came up at last they found the insignia of three German divisions among the piles of the dead. I was promoted to be a major, and every Allied government gave me a decoration—even Montenegro, little Montenegro down on the Adriatic Sea" (66).

Influenced by the absurdity of the sawdust romance, Nick dismisses Gatsby's war reminiscence: " it was like skimming hastily through a dozen magazines" (67). But Carraway misjudges. Gatsby's tale is not incredible in context: unlike the leaking rajah, its subject is realistic, its derailing local and concrete, and the whole internally consistent. It is also confirmed by Nick himself in subsequent narrative when he summarizes Gatsby's career: " He did extraordinarily well in the war. He was a captain before he went to the front, and following the Argonne battles he got his majority and the command of the divisional machine-guns" (150). Such acts of singular courage, of course, were familiar during the First World War. The narrative itself has been colored from the beginning by a sense of restless men—Nick in particular—returning from war, flushed with the adventure and thrill of combat. Nick and Gatsby had established the bond of war experience between them before they even learned each other's names (47), and the

restlessness that Nick has noticed in Gatsby (" He was never quite still [64]) at the outset of their journey recalls again, like Nick's own restlessness, the agitations of the combat veteran.

The Argonne Forest adventure then is not pulp fantasy in the same sense as the melancholy rajah; it is, in fact, close to Nick's own experiences and close to the texture of the novel. Nick has allowed his reactions to outrun his evidence. Yet Carraway's opinion next does a " disconcerting" about-face. As Gatsby brandishes the medal from Montenegro, Nick begins to capitulate: " To my astonishment, the thing had an authentic look" (67). The Oxford picture completes the reversal: " Then it was all true. I saw the skins of tigers flaming in his palace on the Grand Canal; I saw him opening a chest of rubies to ease, with their crimson-lighted depths, the gnawings of his broken heart" (67). Nick's conversion is so odd that one scrutinizes for a hint of irony. There is none, nor any countervailing action either, like Nick's earlier clarifying glance. Nick's capitulation appears confirmed, furthermore, by his own " astonishment" and by Gatsby's " satisfaction" as he pockets up his trophies. Indeed, the flaming tigers' skins and the crimson-lighted chest have a familiar ring about them, recalling, for example, the blooming Mediterranean and idylls of Fifth Avenue of an earlier episode.

Carraway betrays his susceptibility, much like that of which he accuses Gatsby, not only to romance but also to the fantasies of " a dozen magazines." A culminating incident follows. When Gatsby shows a " white card from his wallet" to the motorcycle policeman, who immediately apologizes for having stopped him, Nick asks, " " What was that? ... The

picture of Oxford?" (68). Nick's question is commonly considered sarcastic, though his habitual ambivalence makes an intentional naivete possible as well. Yet if Nick is now taking rhetorical revenge, are we to understand his vision of the Grand Canal as sarcastic, too? Or has Nick simply switched to his rationalist mode? If sarcastic, then Nick will undergo yet another sea change, since the journey ends in an affirmation of fairyland, "the city rising up across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps," where "Even Gatsby could happen, without any particular wonder" (69). Either Nick means, confusingly, sometimes more and sometimes less than what he says, or his impressionability and fastidiousness alternately swallow each other. Nick's "judgment" of Gatsby becomes exaggerated, unstable, and finally self-compromising.

The key to Nick's response, of course, is his admission that his "incredulity was submerged in fascination" (67). To whatever degree Gatsby has won Nick over, he has won him not by an appeal to evidence but by an appeal to imagination. Because of his impressionability, Nick grasps an image and decks it out with his own bright feathers. But through this submersion, Nick's belief has in some measure grown. Fascination breeds credulity. Indeed, Gatsby is such a cliché that on the flimsiest of bona fides he becomes a miracle. Fitzgerald shows Carraway increasingly convinced of Gatsby; simultaneously, he moves the reader as well, but not in unison. Because we diverge from Nick—sometimes hesitating at his reactions, sometimes moving beyond them—we feel, even as we too are compelled with fascination, a firmer objectivity. Nick's confusions, then, become values in the reader's

portrait of Gatsby, making him powerful even as he is remote; plausible yet strange; possible.

Thanks, curiously, to the distance Fitzgerald establishes between Nick and his reader, even Gatsby can happen here, without any particular wonder. As the novel progresses, Nick's sense of possibility recedes. In the memorable scene when Gatsby, Daisy, and Nick tour Gatsby's house (91-97) after the two lovers have been reunited, we hear the note of doubt and disbelief echo like the faint rumble of thunder along the Sound. That counterpoint is structured, in part, into the details of the scene—the rain, the gathering darkness, the isolation of the lovers—but another part is developed by the steady commentary of the narrator. Indeed, while the scenic details are ambiguous in their import, Nick's emerging disillusionment is less so. Nick wants to suggest that for all the intensity of the moment the consummation is unreal, atavistic. But the scene we have is incomplete, perhaps contrary, evidence for his conclusion. Just as Daisy's house is the symbol of the magical, transforming power of wealth, the tour of Gatsby's house is a ritual demonstration of his rightful entry into Daisy's world and beyond Daisy's world into a self-created beatitude of money. The tour is a set-piece, a celebration of the passage into fairyland.

The three enter formally by the big posterns, the long way. Daisy murmurs enchantingly as she admires the feudal silhouette, the gardens, the odors of various flowers. The house is a castle of nascent life and incongruent riches: the Marie Antoinette music rooms and Restoration salons imminent with breathless, imagined guests, “ period bedrooms swathed in rose and

lavender silk and vivid with new flowers" (92). At this moment, Gatsby's life is the wild romance of the young rajah come true, and it is no wonder that Nick is on the verge of asking to see the rubies. Gatsby's shirts are the apotheosis of his wealth, part of the "youth and mystery"-like Daisy's "freshness of many clothes" (150)-that wealth imprisons. They are the riches of the East, existing only to glorify their owner, a numinous beauty so vast and so casually held that Daisy buries her face and cries, herself, in wonder. Daisy is at one with Gatsby's dream. 10 And for this interlude at least, Gatsby achieves his dream of Daisy. Nick, both as participant and as narrator, realizes the immensity of this fulfillment. In the ecstasy of Daisy's presence, Gatsby has transcended his known world: "Sometimes, too, he stared around at his possessions in a dazed way, as though in her actual and astounding presence none of it was any longer real" (92).

As Gatsby tries ineffectually to explain himself, Nick observes the intensity and flow of this transformation: "He had passed visibly through two states and was entering upon a third. After his embarrassment and his unreasoning joy he was consumed with wonder at her presence" (93). Nick, too, has a sense of the delicate magic of the moment. As the three of them look at the pink and golden sunset over the sea, Daisy whispers to Gatsby, "'I'd like to just get one of those pink clouds and put you in it and push you around'" (95). In the ethereal adolescence of that profession of love is its power, and Nick responds to the aura of completeness that surrounds the two lovers: "I tried to go then, but they wouldn't hear of it; perhaps my presence made them feel more satisfactorily alone" (95). The twilight falling, Nick

emphasizes the removal of Gatsby and Daisy into a storybook world of their own. As “The Eve of St. Agnes” leaves its lovers suddenly long ages hence, so too Carraway leaves Gatsby and Daisy inhabiting their vision in solitude: “They had forgotten me, but Daisy glanced up and held out her hand; Gatsby didn’t know me now at all.

I looked once more at them and they looked at me, remotely, possessed by intense life” (97). Countering the tone of ritual, love, and apotheosis in this episode is an undertow, a suggestion of failure and constriction, made by Nick. This judgment is more than a matter of “structural” irony; it is an awkward and personal interpretation. Of Gatsby’s absorption in the thought of the green light on Daisy’s dock, for example, Nick writes: “Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. ... Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one” (94). Not only is the narrator’s grammatical shift from a conditional to a declarative stance peculiar, but the comment itself is peculiar, coming from the observer who has just described a whole mansion full of objects transformed in the enchantment of the lover’s presence. Daisy admiring his rooms, Daisy brushing her hair with his golden brush, Daisy sobbing into his shirts—Gatsby’s count of magical objects has actually increased a thousandfold (92).

Nick’s reflections are not the remarks of the person who almost asks to see the rubies, but rather the more hardened and distant judgments of the man who has seen further to the ruination of Gatsby’s dream. They are remarks true to Nick’s developing character, but less true to the moment that Gatsby

and Daisy inhabit. Nick wants to argue that the dream is unachievable at the very moment that Gatsby is achieving it. Another such incongruent judgment comes as he leaves the lovers: As I went over to say good-by I saw that the expression of bewilderment had come back into Gatsby's face, as though a faint doubt had occurred to him as to the quality of his present happiness. Almost five years! There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. ... No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart. As I watched him he adjusted himself a little, visibly.

His hand took hold of hers, and as she said something low in his ear he turned toward her with a rush of emotion. I think that voice held him most, with its fluctuating, feverish warmth, because it couldn't be over-dreamed—that voice was a deathless song.[97] Again, Nick seems to be speaking from two perspectives: the one of a man describing what he sees, the other of a man pleading, instead, his own view of life. Nick's assertion that "no amount of fire or freshness can challenge" a man's illusions argues discordantly with the "fluctuating, feverish warmth" of the voice that "couldn't be over-dreamed." Daisy's voice is as exciting and compelling as Gatsby's vision of her; her voice is, in fact, the essence of her attractiveness, and its incessant, erotic modulations are the essence of the dream. Just as Daisy's voice held Nick spellbound in chapter 1, it is commensurate also with Gatsby's capacity for wonder.

Nick seems to be temporarily both “inside and outside” this scene, but the conjunction of viewpoints mystifies, as if Daisy’s voice could be both overdreamed and not overdreamed. For the reader, Nick’s descriptions point a different direction from his assessments. The glory of this scene, of course, is its ambiguity about what is really won or lost, a mystery to which Nick is no master sleuth. While Nick misjudges the occasion by the measure of his own later disillusionment, Gatsby and Daisy exist inside the dream, living it. In the novel’s final chapter, a peculiar dislocation or reorientation of the story’s direction takes place which again connects Nick’s personal limitations with his blurred narrative judgment. The first three sections (164-76) of the chapter deal with Gatsby’s funeral. The narrator’s intention is to sink Gatsby’s death into anticlimax by revealing his essential irrelevance to the world in which he had seemed to be the observed of all observers and by demonstrating again the pathetic fragility of the dream which had now “broken up like glass against Tom’s hard malice” (148).

But the story of Gatsby’s burial, ironically, turns out to be not so much about Gatsby as it is about Nick. More than in the immediately preceding chapters, Nick’s judgments and responses are evident here: his feeling of responsibility toward Gatsby, his growing awareness of the callous indifference of others, his final emotional numbness. Nick identifies Gatsby with his own progress. The chapter, in fact, is largely a probing of Nick’s statement that “I found myself on Gatsby’s side, and alone” (165). Nick feels an “intense personal interest” (165) and a ceremonial responsibility toward Gatsby, whose body seems to call out to him for help and companionship (166): “I wanted to get

somebody for him. I wanted to go into the room where he lay and reassure him ..." (165). On Gatsby's behalf, Nick grows in angry disillusionment at the breaches of faith by those like Daisy and Wolfsheimer who should care most for Gatsby at the final hour: " I began to have a feeling of defiance, of scornful solidarity between Gatsby and me against them all" (166). Just as he takes up partial residence in his house, Nick takes up Gatsby's moral residence, becomes Gatsby's factor, seeking out for him the apparent meaning of his death.

That meaning is in its abandonment. After hanging up on Klipspringer, Nick acknowledges, he " felt a certain shame for Gatsby" (170), as if embarrassed for his friend at the indifference of those who accepted his generosity. In the desolation of Gatsby's funeral Nick begins, as the canvas is rolled back, to slip into an unfeeling abstractedness: " I tried to think about Gatsby then for a moment, but he was already too far away, and I could only remember, without resentment, that Daisy hadn't sent a message or a flower" (176). Nick loses Gatsby, too, and the ceremony's diminution becomes its revelation. The narrative perspective toward Gatsby is thus both inside and outside in an odd, sequential way. Though Nick begins as Gatsby's surrogate, he becomes the dulled consciousness of society. That external frame of reference is illustrated in Nick by the futility of his comradeship and by his own failing intimacy with Gatsby. The narrative stance toward Gatsby in death has become the opposite side of its stance toward him in life: while earlier parts of the novel witness the world from the context of Gatsby, later ones witness Gatsby from the context of an indifferent world.

On the strength, and ironic failure, of Nick's very empathy, the narrative perspective reduces Gatsby's dream to ashes. The vitiated ritual of Gatsby's burial finds its emotional correlative in Nick's numbness, the tableau comprising for him life's sentence upon the dreamer and the dream. Nick's psychic depletion becomes, too, the ironic reversal of Gatsby's dazed exaltation in his reunion with Daisy, the two events parallel in their isolation, one in "intense life," the other in death. Is Nick's judgment the same as the fable's? While Nick's numbness succeeds Gatsby's exhilaration in time, does it also succeed in value? Gatsby was a creature of magic and light, and though he used the "glitterati" of Long Island as stardust for Daisy, they were only that, as unimportant to him as he is to them. The loneliness of Gatsby's interment can only be irrelevant to the transforming power of his vision while he lived. Indeed, it is more important to Nick that Gatsby's funeral be attended than it ever could have been to Gatsby. Nick's dual perspective seems self-contradictory: the meaning that he brings to Gatsby's death from outside is inconsistent with his knowledge of Gatsby's special existence.

The isolation of Gatsby's funeral cannot destroy the wonder of his life. The centerpiece both for Nick's "intense personal interest" and for his "shame for Gatsby" is his visit to Wolfsheimer, Gatsby's "closest friend" (172). Oddly, the episode resists Nick's melancholy irony. Wolfsheimer's pleasant and casual gangsterism and his vision of the perfectly criminal in the perfectly patriotic and upper class render the scene comic. Nick's intention, apparently, is to show Wolfsheimer as a genial sentimentalist and then to puncture his "

friendship" (Gatsby's last "' goneggtion'" with his world) by revealing the facile cynicism and manipulateness under it. For Wolfsheim will not attend the funeral, will not "' get mixed up in it'" (173): his friendship is merely conspiracy. Yet Wolfsheim also delivers some parting advice which forms a comment, in turn, upon Nick's brand of camaraderie: "' Let us learn to show our friendship for a man when he is alive and not after he is dead'" (173). Good advice—but Nick has acted out its reverse. He has been a better friend to Gatsby in death than in life, and his " interest" comes like an apology after the calamity he has watched so passively.

Wolfsheim's perspective is the rejoinder to Carraway's. Just as Gatsby's dream is what ennobles him beyond Wolfsheim, so Wolfsheim's statement exposes Carraway. Nick, as he thinks to serve Gatsby in death, is really doing what he likes best: serving a form, a ceremony, a set of manners. The problems with Nick as narrator are similar to the problems with Nick as moral center. The personal characteristics that have caused readers to distrust his moral vision are connected to the qualities that invite the reader's distrust for the accuracy of some narrative judgments: his impressionability in the car ride sequence, his confusing ambivalence during the tour of Gatsby's mansion, his self-serving proprieties surrounding the funeral. Nick's judgments, however, seem to harden in disillusionment even as the fable's ambiguities compound. Rather than the arbiter of final meanings, Nick is a contestant in the novel's internal tugging war for truth.

His narrative failings, in fact, recall other characters who live inside the defensive armor of their own mannerisms, pretensions, and falsehoods:

Myrtle and her comic gentility; Jordan looking like a “good illustration” (178) or losing herself in the curious balancing act of her chin before a disagreeable conversation; Daisy and her “sophistication”; Tom expounding a stupid racism or swinging his forearms like a half-back along Fifth Avenue. Such masks and ploys symbolize characters who will not connect with one another or with the life around them. Nick is the one character capable of perceiving life as Gatsby and the others live it, but he will not shake his fellows out of their defensive pretensions or their complacencies or their lies. Despite Gatsby’s grand protean existence, Nick prefers to believe in the unchangeableness of the human character, or at least the unchangeableness of those careless people who smash up things and creatures. That belief is an expression of Nick’s personality, for he comes to accept the loneliness and isolation of human experience, but it is not the only truth in the novel. Gatsby dies from the shallowness of Daisy, the hard malice of Tom, and his own pride and misjudgment, not from hope and wonder. Though Nick declares that “you can’t repeat the past,” the story neither proves nor disproves it.

That is perhaps the most unsettling effect of the novel: that the myth of Gatsby survives everything—his own presumption, Tom’s malice, and Nick’s gloom. That is surely because the dream is as much emotion as object, as much the capacity for wonder and aesthetic contemplation as it is Daisy Buchanan. Accordingly, the dream never loses its sense of reality: the thrill of excitement and possibility in Daisy’s voice convinces utterly, long after she is confirmed in triviality. Gatsby’s vitality alone is the measure of his

dream. That is why Nick's gradual detachment from Gatsby in death not only misrepresents the dream but is irrelevant to it. Yet we are drawn to the narrator. Beyond the fundamental decency which Nick reveals—as he wipes the dried lather from Mr. McKee's cheek (37), or corrects Daisy's assertion that Tom is shamming about a car deal while really talking to his girlfriend (116), or erases the obscene word from Gatsby's steps (181)—his sheer, brilliant responsiveness to life sometimes redeems his passivity.

That sensitivity compares for the reader, perhaps better than Gatsby's, "to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away" (2). Images flood in upon him, touching off flights of imagination: Jordan's chin, Daisy's voice, Gatsby's smile; he perceives the subtlest social communications; he resonates with sentiment, chagrin, perplexity, and transport. Nick's imagination charms us, even more than the occasions that draw it forth. In the "unprosperous" and "bare" interior of Wilson's wretched garage, for example, Nick fantasizes "that sumptuous and romantic apartments were concealed overhead"—incredible commentary, until it turns into half-truth, for the apartments do contain a woman of "immediately perceptible vitality" and "smouldering" nerve ends (25). Again, Fifth Avenue is "so warm and soft, almost pastoral," that he "wouldn't have been surprised to see a great flock of white sheep turn the corner" (28). At the party in Washington Heights, as Catherine talks disparagingly on Monte Carlo, for Nick, "The late afternoon sky bloomed in the window for a moment like the blue honey of the Mediterranean" (34).

We feel a special affection for Nick, in part because the freshness and humor of the novel are substantially an expression of his vision. We wish him well. Our affinity with Nick is also a function of the novel's first-person point of view, a narrative perspective for which Wayne Booth's comment about Emma applies with equal force: "the sustained inside view leads the reader to hope for good fortune for the character with whom he travels, quite independently of the qualities revealed."¹² Together with his narrative intimacy, Nick's likeability with the audience creates (as Kenneth Burke would have it) form.¹³ These two phenomena arouse expectations within the psyche of the reader that the resolution of the narrative will also bring about Nick's personal fulfillment. Some version of a positive finish—wisdom, if not joy—is implicit in the very condition of the novel, the aesthetic choices Fitzgerald has made. Part of the work's ambivalence, however, stems from Fitzgerald's undercutting of the novel's form; he defeats our expectations, for Nick loses Gatsby, misses in love, and retreats to the safe and complacent Middle West of his past.

I suspect that the discomfort so many readers have felt with the novel's ending is a direct expression of this irresolution in Gatsby's form, a dissonance which must reinforce our sense of Nick's limitations. The conclusion of the novel challenges any blithe acceptance of Nick—as moral arbiter, as judicious observer, as companion, as a character fully entitled to our expectations of good fortune. Indeed, Nick's charming impressionability contains the seeds of his own disablement. His imagination is the strongest part of his character, as his fantasies about entering the lives of beautiful

women on Fifth Avenue suggest; but the romance of life consists more in what he rhapsodizes than in what he does. As Nick himself observes, there is a “haunting loneliness” and “wast[e]” about such a life (57). While Nick reverberates like a tympan with felt life, he is the opposite of Gatsby, fixed, like the wall of the cave against which the shadows play. Readers sometimes confuse the narrator of *The Great Gatsby* with its author, but the novel is far more ambiguous and morally disconcerting than the attitude that Nick would have us accept.

The work represents a kind of miscegenation of forms, a romance enclosed in a novel of manners, and Nick and Gatsby seem attached as if by pulleys: as the one is more credible, the other is less so. Gatsby can be both criminal and romantic hero because the book creates for him a visionary moral standard that transcends the conventional and that his life affirms. 14 However, nothing in Nick compels our contemplation or our wonder; he lives in the image of an increasingly reductive melancholy, not of a transcending dream. While Nick has begun the novel addressing questions of judgment, he steadily reveals the infirmity of his own. Nick learns disillusionment for himself, but his unreliable assessments at several key moments distance the reader from the same inevitability.

That difference, in fact, is part of the enduring fascination of Fitzgerald's employment of a first-person point of view in the novel. While Fitzgerald subverts our expectations for Nick, he does not wholly subvert the moral or emotional justice of those expectations. The possibility of fulfillment remains latent within the life of the novel despite Nick's inability to attain it. If Nick's

ending betrays the story, the novel's inextinguishable sense of possibility partly restores it. Ultimately, the failure of Nick's narration is a failure of his will to believe, even in his own imagination. Too cautious to pay the price for living too long with a single dream, Nick pays the much dearer price for living too long with no dream.

Notes

1. Foster, "The Way to Read Gatsby," in *Sense and Sensibility in Twentieth-Century Writing*, ed. Brom Weber (Carbondale, Ill., 1970), pp. 94-95. Cf. John W. Aldridge, "The Life of Gatsby," in *Twelve Original Essays on Great American Novels*, ed. Charles Shapiro (Detroit, 1958), p. 211; and Marius Bewley, "Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America," *The Sewanee Review* 62 (1954): 223. 2. Robert W. Stallman, "Gatsby and the Hole in Time," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 1, no. 4 (1955): 2-16; rpt. in *The House That James Built and Other Literary Studies* (East Lansing, Mich., 1961), pp. 131-50; Gary J. Scrimgeour, "Against The Great Gatsby," *Criticism* 8 (1966): 83-85; Peter L. Hays, "Hemingway and Fitzgerald," in *Hemingway in our Time*, ed. Richard Astro and Jackson L. Benson (Corvallis, Ore., 1974), p. 96. 3. Robert Emmet Long, *The Achieving of "The Great Gatsby": F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1920-25* (Lewisburg, Pa., 1979), p. 145; Barry Gross, "Our Gatsby, Our Nick," *The Centennial Review* 14 (1970): 334-36; A. E. Elmore, "Nick Carraway's Self-Introduction," in *Fitzgerald/Hemingway Annual 1971*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli and C. E. Frazer Clark, Jr. (Dayton, Ohio, 1971), p. 137; Milton Hindus, *F. Scott Fitzgerald: An Introduction and Interpretation* (New York, 1968), pp. 40-41; Milton R. Stern, *The Golden Moment: The Novels of F. Scott*

Fitzgerald (Urbana, Ill., 1970), p. 288; Richard D. Lehan, *F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Craft of Fiction* (Carbondale, Ill., 1966), p. 111; Foster, p. 108. 4. Lehan, p. 112; Scrimgeour, 83-84; Robert Ornstein, "Scott Fitzgerald's Fable of East and West," *College English* 18 (1956-57): 142-43; Gross, p. 339; Oliver H. Evans, "'A Sort of Moral Attention': The Narrator of *The Great Gatsby*," in *Fitzgerald/Hemingway Annual 1971*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli and C. E. Frazer Clark, Jr. (Dayton, Ohio, 1971), p. 120; Robert Sklar, *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Last Laocoön* (New York, 1967), p. 192; Sergio Perosa, *The Art of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, trans. Sergio Perosa and Charles Matz (Ann Arbor, 1965), p. 70; Ruth Betsy Tenenbaum, "'The Gray-Turning, Gold-Turning Consciousness' of Nick Carraway," in *Fitzgerald/Hemingway Annual 1975*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli and C. E. Frazer Clark, Jr. (Englewood, Colo., 1975), p. 54. 5. See Stern, p. 193; Scrimgeour, p. 83.

6. Evans, pp. 117-39; Tenenbaum, pp. 37-55. Cf. Hindus, pp. 40, 50; William T. Stafford, *Books Speaking to Books: A Contextual Approach to American Fiction* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1981), pp. 43-50. 7. Sklar, p. 187. See also Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (Garden City, N. Y., 1957), pp. 162-67. For a different view of the novel's change in tone see E. Fred Carlisle, "The Triple Vision of Nick Carraway," *Modern Fiction Studies* 11 (1965-66): 351-60. 8. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York, 1925), pp. 14, 15; cited hereafter in the text by page. 9. For a discussion of the fairy tale elements in *Gatsby* see Peter L. Hays, "Gatsby, Myth, Fairy Tale, and Legend," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 41 (1977): 213-23. 10. Stern, p. 175, considers this effect a "slip" on the part of Fitzgerald. See also Bewley, p.

241; and Ernest H. Lockridge, Introduction, *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "The Great Gatsby": A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Ernest H.

Lockridge (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1968), p. 14. 11. See Peter Lisca, "Nick Carraway and the Imagery of Disorder," *Twentieth Century Literature* 13 (1967): 26-27; see also Long, pp. 181-82, 214-15, n. 8. 12. *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, 1961), pp. 245-46.

13. "Psychology and Form," *Counter-Statement*, 2nd ed. (Los Altos, Calif., 1953), pp. 29-44. 14. Lawrence W. Hyman, "Moral Attitudes and the Literary Experience," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 38 (1979): 159-65.

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