

Unreliable narration in f. scott fitzgerald and julian barnes



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An “unreliable narrator” is defined as “a narrator whose credibility has been seriously compromised.[1]” The phrase itself was first coined by Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961): in the course of his analysis, Booth goes on to argue that “A narrator is reliable when he speaks or acts in accordance with the norms of the work, unreliable when he does not.[2]” Although a theory later challenged by Peter J Rabinowitz, the idea of the “unreliable narrator” does provide some context to the concept of “unreliability.” As I will argue, the main difference between the presentations of two respective narrators, Tony in *The Sense of an Ending* [2011] and Nick in *The Great Gatsby* [1925], is how reliable the narrators consider themselves to be, compared to what the reader may believe. Although both seem to some extent unreliable, our opinions do change at key moments in each novel.

The way in which the narrators are used by the writers provide clues as to why they act as they do. Fitzgerald uses his book as an opportunity to launch a scathing attack on American society in the 1920s. He argues that instead of separating itself from the days of the past as originally thought, American society has changed very little, with distinct social boundaries remaining, presented in *The Great Gatsby* as the contrast between East Egg, “...the white palaces of fashionable East Egg” [G 8][3] and the Valley of Ashes, “where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens.” [G 21] Here, East Egg shows how the social elite remains secure thanks to the wealth of its ancestors. The Valley of Ashes, meanwhile, represents the crushed dreams of ‘normal’ citizens who had hoped to make something of their lives by following the American Dream, only to find that America is still

enslaved to the traditional European social system set up by colonial rule, leaving behind only “foul dust”[G 6]. By launching this attack, Fitzgerald would not want to be directly associated with these ideas, largely to avoid tarnishing his reputation (he stood in both social camps – mixing with upper class circles and writing for a readership of a multitude of classes). If Daisy appears to be based on Fitzgerald’s wife, Zelda, it is possible that the author would want a filter to distance himself from Daisy’s portrayal as a shallow, self-centered, and even hurtful woman. The situation is quite different in *The Sense of an Ending*, where the author Julian Barnes has a more personal reason for writing the book. Some critics view the book as allowing Barnes to properly come to terms with the death of his wife in 2008 and to present his views on the importance and connection between memory and death. His narrator therefore could be seen an alternative perspective. In his 2013 book *Levels of Life*, Barnes tells us that he contemplated suicide, his preferred method being “a hot bath a glass of wine and an exceptionally sharp Japanese carving knife,”[4] the same method used by Adrian in *The Sense of an Ending*. Therefore, you could argue that he is considering the actions and repercussions of his potential suicide. However, it does show that the motives behind the two novels are different, with Barnes seeing his work as a therapeutic and reflective way to cope with his wife’s untimely death and Fitzgerald looking more to produce a good story, while simultaneously distancing himself from the key messages of the book.

The initially-presented forms that the narrators take also offer strong contrasts. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Barnes starts by constructing an air of unreliability around Tony’s narration: Tony tells us “I remember in no

particular order:" [S 3][5] before launching into a fragmented list of what seem to be random memories, (" a shiny inner wrist... steam rising... gouts of sperm... a river rushing... bathwater long gone cold..." [S 3]) although they soon become important. Early on, Tony refers to one of the key concepts of the book – the link between memory and documentation for recording history. Adrian explains that " History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation" [S 17]. The linked theme of the book is that Tony is attempting to figure out the story of what happened with very little documentation, so that memory is used to plug the gaps, " imperfect[ly]". This quotation can also be used to look at Nick's narration in *The Great Gatsby* where the reader is expected to believe the story as fact simply because it is the only form of " documentation" with which the reader is presented. We presume, however, that Nick does not suffer the same memory issues as Tony because he is dictating events from less than two years ago (" When I came back from the East last autumn" [G 5]) unlike Tony, whose own gap is much larger (" I've followed... the fall of Communism, Mrs Thatcher, 9/11, global warming" [S 60]). Nick, meanwhile, is presented without Tony's cognitive inadequacies. Early on he says " Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope" [G 5] and insists " I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known" [G 48], Fitzgerald encouraging us to see Nick as reliable.

The effect here is that whereas Tony's failings are emphasized, making the reader aware of the unreliability of the narration, Nick is used to deliberately misguide and deceive us, suggesting that Fitzgerald wants to hide certain

elements of Gatsby from us. Gatsby is presented as an idol (“there was something gorgeous about him” [G 6]) giving a strong sense of deliberate deception, a contrast with Tony, who only provides a mixture of confused memories in a blatantly unreliable account.

However, it is possible to argue that Barnes’ narrator does in fact attempt to deceive us by ‘forgetting’ to mention some important facts. His poor memory is an excuse (“my best memory.” [S 19]): “few other memories came back to me.” [S 35]. What perhaps makes us suspicious is how quickly he turns from moments of strong detail to a sense of confusing ambiguity. When Tony describes breakfast with Mrs Ford, we are told how “The remnants of the broken one were still in the pan; she flipped them casually into the swing-bin and half-threw the hot frying pan into the wet sink” [S 29]. However, he moves on to “When Veronica and the menfolk returned...” [S 29] without giving any timescale or detail of what happened in between, not unlike Nick’s fragmented account in Chapter 2 of *The Great Gatsby*: “Beauty and the Beast... Loneliness... Old Grocery Horse... Brook’n Bridge... Then I was lying half-asleep.” [G 32]. Tony’s obfuscation may not seem relevant at the time; but after we discover Adrian’s affair with Mrs Ford, we are interested to know whether something happened between her and Tony, the sexual connotations of “fizzed” [S 29] and “steamed” [S 29] helping to back this argument up. Nick, meanwhile, is proven to be unreliable through his inconsistencies. In chapter 7 on the same page, Nick says “I’ve always been glad I said that. It was the only compliment I ever gave him.” [G 122]. However, just a few lines down, we are told that he “disapproved of him from beginning to end.” [G 122]. The contradictions suggest that Nick

himself is conflicted. Being a normal man makes him tell some truth about his opinion on Gatsby, “ Gatsby, who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn.” [G 5/6] However, Nick also wants to present Gatsby as being a “ great” man (hence the title) and so attempts to cover up his “ unheroic[6]” (according to Claridge) qualities. Gatsby’s illegal activities are only implied, not explicitly explained as Peters describes: Gatsby is “ a shadowy figure, built up from a series of chronologically disjointed rumours, anecdotes and brief impersonations.[7]” There is stronger evidence therefore that Fitzgerald uses his narrator to deceive – Nick fails to “ reserv[e] judgements” [G 5] as was previously promised. With Tony, however, we can only guess whether he has deliberately left facts out or whether the flaws of memory itself is the reason, “ memory is what we thought we’d forgotten... time doesn’t act as a fixative, rather as a solvent.” [S 63]

In his NY Times review, Geoff Dyer describes Tony as “ reliably unreliable. [8]” Certainly he is set up in a way that we expect as an unreliable narrator of “ history.” Tony’s own description is that his story will be “ a few incidents that have grown into anecdotes... approximate memories which time has deformed into certainty.” [S 4] Yet Barnes also signals we should mistrust any narrator whose own story is obscured, since “ we need to know the history of the historian in order to understand the version that is being put in front of us.” [S 12] Both Nick and Tony are brief about their own lives, Tony saying “ I met Margaret, we married and 3 years later Susie was born.” [S 54]. Nick, meanwhile says “ I just remembered that today’s my birthday” [G 108] before swiftly changing the topic back to Gatsby. Should we then be

concerned that Tony and Nick's real lives are absent from their narratives? It can be read that neither narrator is "great" enough to be the center of his story – as Tony comments: "This was another of our fears: that Life wouldn't turn out to be like Literature." [S 15] Dyer describes Tony as 'in keeping with the national average[9]' and the same could be said of Nick. Neither enjoys a "novel-worthy" (S 15) life, so they look elsewhere for their material, becoming "onlookers and bystanders... important things could happen." [S 15]

The two 'heroes' of the respective books are presented very differently, yet both presentations foster the sense of unreliability. Barnes makes Tony's perception of Adrian that of a martyr ("He had a better mind and a more rigorous temperament than me; he thought logically, and then acted on the conclusion of logical thought." [S 53]) thanks to his suicide. This completely changes when the 'truth' is revealed: "I had to recalibrate Adrian, change him from a Camus... into what? No more than a version of Robson" [S 140-41]. Adrian becomes no better than the "unphilosophical, self-indulgent and inartistic" [S 14] Robson. His 'hero' status disappears, and we realize that the image was unreliable: Adrian was presented as a martyr when he is, in fact, a fake. A similar situation arises in *The Great Gatsby* but not for the same reason. Gatsby is presented by Nick as a kind of god, "He stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way" [G 20], someone people should worship because of his 'rags to riches' life: "Mr Nobody from Nowhere" [G 103] becoming great is the embodiment of the American Dream. However, like Adrian, he turns out to be a fake, as Pearson describes, he is a "false prophet of the American Dream.[10]" However, unlike in *The*

Sense of an Ending where Tony sees the light, Nick hides from the truth, preserving the god-like image. The direct reference to God comes in “ the truth... that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God...” [G 78]. This is blatantly ironic. Gatsby is a bootlegger and a showman, barely better than the rumors which initially complete his character: “ Somebody told me they thought he killed a man once” [G 34]. However, Gatsby also represents the American Dream and how corrupt it has become. Siniša Smiljanić says that ‘ The fundamental presupposition that the American Dream can be achieved by anyone as long as they work hard turns out to be nothing more than a mere illusion, a lie intended to give people something to live for.[11]’ This is fairly represented through Gatsby – just as he is a fake, so is the dream, because American society has yet to escape its colonial past. The setting, on the USA’s east coast, strengthens the links to traditional Europe. Tony shows unreliability in that he presents Adrian incorrectly “ calibrat[ing]” (S 140) Adrian, but we are given his updated perspective. However, Nick’s epiphany remains hidden because Nick hides himself from the truth, thus his narrative turns out to be wholly unreliable with Gatsby’s darker side never truly investigated.

The nature of the narrators plays a key role here. If we explore the way in which they react to society around them, an interesting comparison can be made with T. S. Eliot’s ‘ The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock’ (1915). This poem has different links to each text. Comparing the poem with The Sense of an Ending, one can draw comparisons between the like-minded Tony and Prufrock. Prufrock seems always to doubt his ability to speak to women: “ Then how should I begin/To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?

[12]” We know that Tony struggled in this sense, saying in his first term at university “ I just hung around and tried to make interesting remarks while expecting to mess things up” [S 20]. Both Nick and Tony suffer from Prufrockian social awkwardness, affecting their narrations. Their perspective simply observing instead of doing, being “ peaceable” or “ cowardly” [S 35] should help to give a more reliable narration. However, Eliot’s link with Gatsby is even stronger; Mike Ettner describes Fitzgerald as “ a self-described enthusiastic worshipper of T. S. Eliot.[13]” The Valley of Ashes seems an image directly inspired by ‘ The Wasteland.’ (1922) The illusion to Eliot’s “...Arms that are braceleted and white and bare[14]” is apparent when Nick makes reference to Catherine’s “ bracelets which jingled up and down her arms” [G 26]. This is one example of how ‘ oddly’ the narrators observe feminine beauty. Yet this connection to Prufrock is more important than just characterizing our narrators as social outcasts. Their inability to understand social situations lead to misinterpretations such as Tony’s inability to understand relationships, shown when he apparently breaks up with Veronica, then has sex with her and concludes “ No” [G 37] when considering the longevity of the relationship. The same can be said of Nick, who seems unable to understand his relationship with Jordan: “ We talked like that for a while, and then abruptly we weren’t talking any longer.” [G 123]. Here, Nick seems unable to fully grasp the concept of being in a relationship and so (for almost no apparent reason) puts to bed any idea that they could have been a couple.

However, Fitzgerald and Barnes teach us that even decentered narrators do more than simply describe what is happening. They are the ‘ windows’

through which we view the text. Eliot's poem is the meandering stream of consciousness of an emotionally paralyzed persona. It is his 'love song', yet it fails to live up to the expectations of this form, just as the protagonist fails to live up to the pretentious promise of his name. This then is the ultimate result of the narrators' unreliability. The reader must recognize that what the texts promise is not always what they achieve. Fitzgerald promises us Gatsby the "great" man, yet Gatsby becomes a tainted hero. Barnes promises us the sense of an ending, but when Tony is forced to change his mind, to recognize that nothing makes up for a lack of testimony, we are left wondering if one "gets it" at all.

[1] Booth, (1983), p. 3 [2] Ibid, p. 4 [3] Fitzgerald, (2008), p. 8 [4] Barnes, (2013), p. 80 [5] Barnes, (2011), page 3 [6] Claridge, (1993), p. 8 [7] Peters, (2003), p. 20 [8] Dyer, (2011), NY Times Website [9] Ibid [10] Pearson, (1970), page 4 [11] Smiljanić, (2011), page 2 [12] Eliot, The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock, (2001) L66 [13] Ettner, (2013), Mike Ettner's Blog [14] Elliot, 'The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock' (1920), L. 69