Boats Against the Current Born Back Ceaselessly into Our Past: Narrative Fragmentation and the Construction of Meaning in *The Great Gatsby*

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At the end of the first chapter of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby,* when Nick first observes Jay Gatz, Nick relays a peculiar incident, one of seemingly minor importance:

> Already it was deep summer on roadhouse roofs and in front of wayside garages where new red gas-pumps sat out in pools of light, and when I reached my estate at West Egg I ran the car under its shed and sat for a while on an abandoned grass roller in the yard. The wind had blown off, leaving a loud bright night with wings beating in the trees and a persistent organ sound as the full bellows of the earth blew the frogs full of life. The silhouette of a moving cat wavered across the moonlight, and turning my head to watch it, I saw that I was not alone fifty feet away a figure had emerged from the shadow of my neighbor's mansion and was standing with his hands in his pockets and observing the silver pepper of the stars. Something in the leisurely movements and the secure position of his feet upon the lawn suggested that it was Mr. Gatsby himself, come out to determine what share was his of our local heavens.
>
> I decided to call to him. Miss Baker had mentioned him at dinner, and that would do for an introduction. But I didn't call to him, for he gave a sudden intimation that he was content to be alone—he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could

> have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward—and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness (20-21).

Nick notes the silhouette of the cat, the birds beating their wings in the trees, and the frogs that were bellowing like an organ. Yet, mixed in with these apparently trivial observations lies a green light, so random and indeed so fleeting a moment. As soon as Nick notes the light, his attention is drawn away, and his focus, as well as ours, is taken back to Gatsby and his mysterious disappearance from the front lawn. Of course the whole incident in and of itself has no true significance. It could be argued that it presents a glimpse into Gatsby's solitary nature, but little else could be gleaned from this passage alone. In fact, while the scene narrated by Nick is lyrical, there is little reason for any reader to take notice or realize the tremendous significance of the moment and the green light that Nick sees.

In *The Great Gatsby,* F. Scott Fitzgerald carefully reveals the title character, with minor details skillfully revealed so that the reader can construct a complex portrait of the man who haunts the narrator's imagination: Jay Gatz. Fitzgerald's inclusion of mundane and seemingly unimportant details serves two purposes. First, it requires the reader's active participation in assembling the text, a hallmark of modernist works that contain experimental narrative techniques like the ones Fitzgerald employs. Second, these details and observations that later turn out to be significant to the plot are kept hidden; this allows Fitzgerald to include important keys that provide for a suspense-

filled read that relies upon our ability to reconstruct the narrative of Gatsby's life and sort out the meaning of his death. Fitzgerald masks his own intentions, relying on the perspective of Nick Carraway, calling upon the reader to pull together fragments, fill empty spaces, and fashion a coherent narrative drawn dominantly from Nick's perspective. Like many other modernist works, *The Great Gatsby* calls upon the reader to make meaning out of chaos, order out of disorder. In doing this, Fitzgerald, as a modernist writer obsessed with perspective, foregrounds the nature of interpretation itself, forming a commentary on the way we, like Nick, make meaning from our fragmentary lives, forever interjecting the past while dwelling in an uncertain present and envisioning a meaningful future.

The Great Gatsby is primarily the story of two characters: Jay Gatz (Gatsby) and Nick Carraway. Nick is our narrator and guide; through his eyes and ears we learn Gatsby's story. A typical *nouveau riche* character in the midst of the Jazz age who is best known for his great parties and little else, Gatsby is surrounded by mystery and rumors, and little is known about his life, his work, or how he became who he is. Nick Carraway, it turns out, not only lives next to Jay Gatsby but also is connected to him through a mutual friend, Daisy Buchanan. As the story unfolds, Gatsby befriends Carraway and tells him his story and welcomes him into his life, a world of social elites and social climbers vying for attention, wealth, and fame. Gatsby's motivations are questionable as we learn that his true goal is to reunite with his true love Daisy; as the novel progresses it becomes increasingly obvious that separating truth from fiction in the novel is difficult. As Daisy and Gatsby are reunited their relationship takes center stage, but all the while string of characters carry on with their lost lives: Daisy's

husband Tom is having an affair, a detail that seems obvious to most of the characters, but it is impossible to say whether Daisy really knows. Tom's lover Myrtle is also married, and her husband suspects the affair and is ready to act, to bring the affair to an end.

The first half of the novel serves largely as the introduction to a great tragedy. Characters are introduced and seen in the setting of their typical lives, and Nick narrates all the details that will later become important. Once this stage is set, the real story begins as Tom moves to confront Gatsby about the possibility of an affair between Daisy and Gatsby. This confrontation sets in motion a series of events that leads to tragedy, death, and judgments by both the narrator Nick and his readers. Tom's confrontation is not directly responsible, but it sets in motion a chain of events beginning with Daisy accidentally hitting Myrtle with a car and ending with Myrtle's husband killing Gatsby and then committing suicide. The plot is intricate and exciting, but, while the story itself is fascinating, the action in the novel moves at a surprisingly slow pace. Fitzgerald slow plays his hand and passes on a fast-moving tale of the American jazz age to focus on seemingly minor details in the beginning of the novel. While he makes up for this lack of action by the end of the novel, Fitzgerald still allows us to determine each character's significance and to pass our own judgments. Yet, we may wonder why he goes to such great lengths to establish seemingly insignificant details and facts.

While Fitzgerald's narrative technique is essential to the novel, there are clearly other important issues at work. In fact, much of the critical writing on *The Great Gatsby* deals with the American dream and its moral implications or the Jazz age and how

Fitzgerald examines and speaks about all that came with that era, all of which are integral to the exploration of the character of Nick Carraway. In particular, the idea of the American dream is important, as Nick is the final arbiter of Gatsby's dream, its significance and meaning. It is therefore important to examine not just how events and characters are revealed in the novel but also the results of the revelations. Many critics and readers of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* focus on the tragic shape of the story and relate it to both the Lost Generation of the 1920' s and the elusive nature of the American Dream. While such grand interpretations can be made from the novel, the text's art lies in its details, the many seemingly insignificant events and descriptions we encounter on a first read. Such details require readers to assemble a cohesive narrative out of a fragmented text with a limited, unreliable, first person narrator.

John F. Callahan focuses on the American dream, happiness, and the way Fitzgerald approaches Gatsby's story. Callahan writes, "For Fitzgerald the pursuit of happiness and the American Dream were inseparable" (393), and he explains that the failure of the dream (and therefore unhappiness) occurs regardless of the optimism of the heart and soul. While Callahan seems content to generally theorize regarding Fitzgerald's perspective on the American Dream, Jeffrey Louis Decker explains that the failure of Jay Gatsby's dream is indicative of culture that surrounds him and that Fitzgerald's purpose is to comment on that culture. Decker does not note the importance or great evidence that Nick has somehow been corrupted. Decker does see that Gatsby's failure, however, is due, at least in part, to his surrounding and the jazz age culture that Fitzgerald uses as the backdrop for the novel (Decker 53). Decker agrees

with Edwin Fussell's perspective that is Gatsby undeniably a failure and his failure demonstrates society's shortcomings.

Certainly there is an important distinction between the ultimate failure of Gatsby's dream and his failure as a character. Roger Pearson's article "Gatsby: False Prophet of the American Dream" serves to illustrate this point as Pearson claims that "Fitzgerald's unique expression of the American dream lacks the optimism, the sense of fulfillment, so evident in the expressions of his predecessors" (638). Pearson does not blame Gatsby's failure on his character, as others do, but instead blames Fitzgerald's concept of the American dream. Fair or not, Pearson's paradoxical claim in tandem with other criticism reveals the ambiguity Nick creates through his narrative and leaves the issue of failure open for discussion. This narrative technique makes for an artful framing that resists interpretation, especially the kind of interpretation many critics seek as they reduce the text to one thing.

The concept of dreams is often associated with fairy tales and many have made the argument that Fitzgerald's work, and its failed dreams, are a kind of anti-fairy tale. One such argument can be found in Laura Barrett's article, "From Wonderland to Wasteland: *The Wonderful Wizard ofOz, The Great Gatsby,* and the New American Fairy Tale." The article analyses the American fairy tale and also explains how *The Great Gatsby* is both anti-fairy tale and a story of failed dreams. She writes that, "The typical resolution in fairy tales is inverted in *The Great Gatsby* as the hero, rather than marrying and ascending to the throne, loses his princess and sinks into a hole in the ground" (158). She also explains how Nick is introduced to and brought into a World of excess,

corruption, and authenticity (159), which affects his judgment and the way he retells this anti-fairy tale.

Many critics believe Fitzgerald intended to create a story about corruption, a social critique with moral implications. While corruption has long been discussed in *The Great Gatsby,* critics disagree on what the overall message is and what the implications are. Barrett notes Nick has been corrupted, which affects the way he tells the story. Other critics argue failures and corrupted dreams can be affected by time and even left in the past and that Gatsby is a perfect example of this. Jeffrey Steinbrink focuses on rebirth and second chances in the novel and also the way Fitzgerald uses Nick to reveal Gatsby. In "Boats Against the Current: Mortality and the Myth of Renewal in *The Great Gatsby"* Steinbrink explains that Nick carefully demonstrates to his readers both the greatness and the foolishness of Jay Gatsby (164,168). Steinbrink also argues that Nick sees the corrupted and failed dreams of the past and points out the balance between greatness and foolishness (168). While Steinbrink refrains from solely condemning the current culture for Gatsby's problems, he hints at the idea of an idealized past and a problematic present.

Richard Lehan bridges the gap between Steinbrink and Decker and Fussell: "Over and over Fitzgerald's characters experience a conflict between their sense of self and historical possibility; what they try to create is often frustrated by the cruel reality of an unaccommodating age" (153). Lehan clearly acknowledges the challenges of the present time in *The Great Gatsby,* but he also recognizes the internal conflict the characters have created in the past. Lehan goes on to argue that Nick's narration reveals a Gatsby's dual personality, one that illustrates this conflict (154-155). While it is

reasonable that one might construct such an interpretation of Gatsby's personality, Nick controls the revelation of details, creating purposeful ambiguity, which forces the reader, as with many other modernist works, to construct the novel.

Focusing on the ambiguity of the narrative, Kent Cartwright examines the novel's narrative structure in "Nick Carraway as an Unreliable Narrator/[7] Cartwright carefully works through some commonly held conceptions about narration in *The Great Gatsby,* explaining that, "Nick's vision is not identical to Fitzgerald's, or at least to the novel's" (218). Cartwright sees Nick not only as a flawed character but also as a flawed narrator: "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" (218). This view of Nick ultimately leads Cartwright to conclude that, "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" (220). Despite his critique of Nick's perspective, Cartwright does recognize some of the important roles that Nick plays as storyteller. Cartwright argues that Fitzgerald uses Nick to draw the reader in and to allow the reader to become obsessed with Jay Gatsby, "even though Gatsby teeters on the edge of the ridiculous" (221). Cartwright describes how Fitzgerald does this by including a "kernel of actual or even metaphoric truth in each of Gatsby's falsehoods" (221). Cartwright makes a compelling point, but Gatsby's apparent falsehoods are not as great or even as prevalent as Cartwright would have us believe. Further, Cartwright explains that, "To whatever degree Gatsby has won Nick over, he has won him not by

an appeal to evidence but by an appeal to imagination" (224). Cartwright does acknowledge that Nick has some sort of a bond with the reader, "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" (231). However, Cartwright explains: "The conclusion of the novel challenges any blithe acceptance of Nick as moral arbiter, as judicious observer, as companion, as a character full entitled to our expectations of good fortune" (231). Cartwright may be correct in claiming that Nick has no stance as a moral arbiter but this status is not unique to Nick and doesn't demand the rejection of everything he has done in the novel.

While Cartwright is largely critical of Nick, pointing out many of his flaws and shortcomings, Thomas E. Boyle focuses on the importance of these failings and the way they create a novel filled with unreliable narration. Boyle works largely from Wayne Booth's exploration of techniques in fiction and disagrees with Booth's conclusions about *The Great Gatsby.* Booth claims that Nick plays only a minor role in the novel (Booth 154) and that Nick provides readers with "Thoroughly reliable guidance" (176). Boyle explains that Nick's role is essential and that the goal of his work is to, "See Nick's unreliability as an integral part of the book" (22). In fact, Boyle blames Nick for problems whenever he can, "When the police should be brought in, Nick instead becomes an accomplice after the fact by concealing Daisy's crime of manslaughter. His silence has an important bearing on the events of the novel; it results in Gatsby's murder and Wilson's suicide" (22). However, rather than being merely a passive observer whose morality Fitzgerald critiques, Nick controls the story; Fitzgerald's framing of the story and limited narrative perspective do not enable us to come to clear

decisions about Nick's actions. While Boyle certainly makes apt observations and does a good job of refuting some of the questionable points that Booth makes, Boyle's tendency to advocate the ridiculous is troubling. Boyle argues that Nick's inability to recognize the importance of the etymology of Gatsby's name, as well as other facts reveals Nick is willing to pass on misinformation to the reader (24). Boyle also claims that there is evidence that Nick is actually in love with Daisy and that this love clouds Nick's judgment and the entire narrative (25). Despite his tendency to wander from supportable theories, Boyle does provide a compelling ending to his article. Whereas Gary Scrimgeour's " Against *The Great Gatsby"* argues that the unreliable nature of Nick is merely a sign of Fitzgerald's confusion, Boyle observes that Nick's narration (unreliable as it may be) is carefully planned (26). Boyle does agree with Scrimgeour on one issue: what truly makes Nick unreliable.

Unlike Cartwright, who sees problems in Nick's character, both Scrimgeour and Boyle identify the flaw as the gap between the actions of the novel, Nick's actions, and what Nick actually tells us is occurring. This type of unreliability gives credence to my theorized claim that Fitzgerald intentionally uses Nick, but it also opens the door for Scrimgeour's argument that Fitzgerald is somehow unsure of his actions and the overall meaning or significance of the work. While each perspective is somewhat limited, using both critiques underscores the significance of this unreliability. Fitzgerald could have created an unreliable narrator to create a text that is not easy to interpret and lends itself to paradoxical, ambiguous readings. Critics have clearly agreed that Nick is unreliable, and while many critics disagree on the nature and results of his unreliability, this same uncertainty both creates the novel's art and also enables the reader to participate in the

meaning-making process. As we will see, several later critics have observed the calculated nature of this process; two in particular agree on the importance of this ambiguity to the novel's narrative strategies.

Perhaps one of the most distinguishing features of Nick's narration is the way, even though he is unreliable, and, as critics have noted, often does not stick to the values and the ideals he espouses, Nick creates a sympathetic portrait of Gatsby. Furthermore, many critics argue that Nick often gives us information that turns out to be false; the combination of these two should lead to the rejection of Nick's conclusions not only about Gatsby but also about his dream and his lifestyle. This stance gives credence to Gary Scrimgeour's argument in, " Against *The Great Gatsby/*" where he argues that Fitzgerald is somehow confused in his own writing and that ambiguity as to the trustworthiness of Nick is evidence of Fitzgerald's own inability to comprehend the character and views he creates (26).

The Great Gatsby opens by introducing us to the character of Nick Carraway, and through a vague and meandering introduction, we are shown glimpses of Nick's background and life story. Nick's character is one of the first things discussed; we are given a brief narration that attempts to establish both Nick's fairness and his openness to other people. Before readers even know who Nick is, his name, his place in the story, or anything else about him, they are told a variety of seemingly unimportant things: Nick is inclined to reserve all judgments (1), Nick is found trustworthy by a variety of different people, so much so that he has "frequently feigned sleep, preoccupation, or hostile levity" when he realizes an intimate revelation is forthcoming, and that despite Nick's bountiful tolerance it does eventually "have its limits" (1-2). The issue of trust is

an important one and while it may seem important for readers to see Nick as honest and non-judgmental, it is just as important for the advancement of the story that characters within the novel trust him and feel they can be honest with him as well. It is because of this trust that Nick is often privy to the "secret griefs of wild, unknown men"

While we have no indication of the importance or role of Nick in the story, we are repeatedly told why we should trust Nick as narrator. Nick reveals that he is from a mid-western family and is college educated, and he attempts to portray himself as a typical, trustworthy mid-westerner, someone the readers of the novel can relate to. Other characters in the novel are directly contrasted to Nick by their very nature. Gatsby is a gambler, associated with gangsters, and is in general not a character that most readers find a connection with. Yet the personal details about Nick are all that we know; no other character in the novel is revealed in this manner. For the sake of the story that is about to be told, it seems that it would be imperative that readers trust Nick and accept his perspectives and opinions, and of course, this is one of the most controversial aspects of Nick's life as a character and narrator.

Nick's own ability to identify with Gatsby allows readers to do the same. In many ways the readers of *The Great Gatsby* are represented by Nick and mirrored by him in his narration. As readers we are able to see that Nick is sympathetic towards Gatsby's position and dream, and it also seems easy to be drawn to this perspective and agree with Nick's conclusions regarding Gatsby. Fitzgerald tells us that Nick is impartial and objective, and yet he carefully shows us that Nick likes Gatsby and is (in

his own way) rooting for him. While Nick's actions generally show us this desire for Gatsby's success in achieving his dreams his own admissions occasionally do the same:

> When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart. Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction. Gatsby, who represented everything for which I have unaffected scorn. (2)

The action of the novel is truly book-ended by such admonitions from Nick. Here in the opening pages, and again as Nick describes his final encounter with Jay Gatsby.

Nick's final encounter illustrates the duality that Fitzgerald has written into Nick's character: he truly likes and sympathizes with Gatsby while still holding on to his sense of disapproval. Nick explains that he didn't want to go into work because he didn't want to leave Gatsby (153). When Nick finally decides to leave he tells us:

> We shook hands and I started away. Just before I reached the hedge I remembered something and turned around. "They're a rotten crowd," I shouted across the lawn. "You're worth the whole damn bunch put together." I've always been glad I said that. It was the only compliment I ever gave him, because I disapproved of him from beginning to end (154).

It is easy to see why this duality is often taken as unreliability in a negative way, yet Nick's role as both narrator and character seems not only more important but to have more common sense when this paradox is seen as a positive thing. We see through

Nick's eyes; we access the story through him. If Fitzgerald wants us to sympathize with Gatsby and his dream (regardless of how unrealistic it may be), what better way to encourage us to do so than to provide a narrator that is able to both realize Gatsby's tremendous flaws and sympathize with him.

By the end of the novel we are so focused on Gatsby and his life that it is easy to forget that Nick doesn't even introduce his readers to Jay Gatsby until the 48th page of the novel, over a quarter of the way through the text. In fact, until Gatsby's first meeting with Daisy, we have little first hand knowledge of Gatsby or his true character. Our opinions are shaped largely by rumors and opinions that Nick overhears or decides to pass along from other characters. Jordan, Lucille, and third guest at one of Gatsby's parties reveal to Nick that, "Somebody told me they thought he [Gatsby] killed a man once" (44). The conversation continues, " 'I don't think its so much that,' argued Lucille skeptically; 'its more that he was a German spy during the war' " (44). Beyond the manner in which we associate with Nick, Fitzgerald also guides Nick's narrative in a way that carefully reveals and withholds information thereby controlling the story in a very precise way. The green light at the end of Daisy's dock is one of many occasions where Fitzgerald uses Nick to establish the facts of Jay Gatsby's story from a limited point of view. The day that Gatsby meets Daisy for the first time in five years, for example, is when Fitzgerald, through Nick, begins to allow us to see the significance of the green light (87). As Gatsby is taking Daisy throughout his home, he takes her outside to view the grounds and the pool and comments:

> "If it wasn't for the mist we could see your home across the bay," said Gatsby.
>
> "You always have a green light that burns all night at

> the end of your dock." Daisy put her arm through his abruptly, but he seemed absorbed in what he had just said. Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one. (92-93)

At this juncture an astute reader will recognize the significance of the earlier passage and will also notice the later references in the novel to the green light and all that it stands for. Jerome Thale writes that in this passage, " The novel validates the image with which it starts and makes that image not an appearance but the fundamental truth. In the course of the story Nick passes from meaningless knowledge, to error, to the original knowledge made meaningful" (70). Fitzgerald not only does this throughout *The Great Gatsby,* but also he also uses Nick to drive home the importance of these minor and often passed over details.

Through his narrator, Fitzgerald not only controls the information given regarding Gatsby, but he also uses the information about other characters to affect the reader's perspective of Gatsby. Nowhere is this more evident than in the characterization of Tom Buchanan. Nick's first description of Tom explains that he had, "a body capable of enormous leverage, a cruel body" (7). Nick also tells us that, "His speaking voice, a gruff husky tenor, added to the impression of fractiousness he conveyed" (7). Even Tom's actions towards Nick are rough and cold, "wedging his

tense arm imperatively under mine, Tom Buchanan compelled me from the room as though he were moving a checker to another square" (11). Like the description of the green light, these early characterizations seem innocent enough, and Nick does seem to be doing his job in narrating and describing the characters that he interacts with. Nick never openly condemns Tom; throughout the novel he continues to be a good friend to Tom. Yet we understand through the subtle descriptions in his narration that there is something he doesn't like about him, and though he refuses to condemn him (as does the reader), he doesn't have to like him.

Tom's character is further examined and shown during his interactions with his mistress, Myrtle Wilson, and her husband George Wilson. Tom's actions seem calloused, and he seems to care for little except his own pleasure. His willingness to interact with Mr. Wilson despite his inappropriate relationship with Wilson's wife is evidence of his questionable character, but his character is further illustrated by the way he treats Wilson. Nick explains that in one early encounter Tom tells Wilson he will soon have a car to sell to him,

> "Next week; I've got my man working on it now."
>
> "Works pretty slow doesn't he?"
>
> "No, he doesn't," said Tom coldly. "And if you feel that way about it, maybe I'd better sell it somewhere else after all" (25).

These descriptions of Tom joined with his actions paint an extremely negative portrait and leave little room for sympathy. This obviously works in Gatsby's favor as Tom is established as Gatsby's chief rival in the pursuit of Daisy.

Perhaps the most intriguing revelation about Tom is the very fact of his affair. Nick obviously relays the details to us but Fitzgerald chooses not to have Nick directly tell us of the affair (as Nick often does with information about Gatsby); instead Fitzgerald has Nick relay the story as told by Jordan Baker, a friend of the Buchanan family. Jordan flatly explains that, "Tom's got some woman in New York/' and states that, "She might have the decency not to telephone him at dinner time. Don't you think?" (15). Again, this revelation seems insignificant and the fact that Nick is describing Jordan's revelation of the facts seems even more insignificant. But nothing could be further from the truth. Consider the implications of Gatsby, or any other male figure that might be attracted to Daisy, revealing this information about Tom. Even Nick could be accused of trying to justify Gatsby's interaction with Daisy or accused of being too judgmental. Yet Jordan is the only character that can innocently present this information about Tom without an ulterior motive a reader might question. While we do later learn that Jordan seems to have a problem telling the truth (and by that point Tom's relationship has been well established and witnessed by Nick himself), her apparent early credibility is essential to the early portrait of Tom's character. Furthermore, even the later revelation about her dishonesty helps establish a contrast for Gatsby as a character. Thale explains that, "The sentimentality of Tom helps make Gatsby's romanticism credible; the irresponsible Tom and Daisy are contrasted with the dedicated Gatsby, and the dishonest Jordan with the faithful Gatsby" (72). The significance of all this is that Gatsby himself is largely a mystery and as readers we really make up our mind about his nature through the many little hints and episodes that are slowly revealed by Nick. In fact, there are times (as with Tom) that we are so

put off by other characters actions that it is the information which we don't have and the gaps in Gatsby's story lead us to embrace him.

The contrast seen in the novel between Daisy and Gatsby's relationship and Tom and Myrtle's is yet another way in which lack of information forces the reader to make a judgment. Tom and Myrtle's relationship is described in detail. We know how they interact with each other and how shallow their relationship is. Nick spends a whole day with the two and describes in detail how abrasive, spoiled, and immature both characters are:

> Some time toward midnight Tom Buchanan and Mrs. Wilson stood face to face, discussing in impassioned voices whether Mrs. Wilson had any right to mention Daisy's name. "Daisy! Daisy! Daisy" shouted Mrs. Wilson. "I'll say it whenever I want to! Daisy! Dai-" Making a short deft movement, Tom Buchanan broke her nose with his open hand. Then there were bloody towels upon the bathroom floor, and women's voices scolding, and high over the confusion a long broken wail of pain. (37)

Of course, Nick never describes physical altercations between Gatsby and Daisy. And, other than their first meeting at Nick's house, no real interaction is ever relayed. As readers, we tend to reject the immaturity and shallowness of the Tom/Myrtle relationship, and, although we know little about the true nature of Gatsby and Daisy, it is easy to accept that the relationship seems more real, more grounded, and therefore more powerful and real.

Critics have noticed not only the importance of the limited descriptions of Gatsby by Nick but also the importance of the unreliable message that Nick gives the reader, the times when Nick is inconsistent in his beliefs and judgments. John Fraser explains that despite the fact that he doesn't see Gatsby as a truly heroic figure he does see how Fitzgerald uses Nick to careful shape and portray Gatsby in a specific light: One of the more interesting aspects of the book is the extraordinarily skillful sleight-of-hand with which Fitzgerald has avoided coming to terms with the fact of this [Gatsby's] criminality in the interest of sustaining his opening disjunction between the "pure" figure of the dreaming Gatsby and the "foul dust" that stirred in his wake. (560) In fact, Fraser goes so far as to explain, "That Gatsby should have evoked the kind of sentimentality that he has is in part, however, a tribute to a further aspect of the illusion of largeness that the novel so brilliantly and charmingly generates" (562). The sentimentality that Fraser speaks of seems less peculiar when considering the constant flow of carefully explained (or withheld) details that we have already explored.

Perhaps the most significant manipulation that Fitzgerald achieves through Nick is not in elevating Gatsby above the other characters in the novel (for this is not entirely the most difficult achievement). Fraser puts it this way, "But the basic question, after all, is not how Gatsby's consciousness and conduct are helped to appear normative through their relationship to Nick Carraway's, but how far they ought in fact to seem so to us" (559). How does Gatsby's conduct appear to the reader? How is it that Nick's readers can somehow look favorably on a man who is rumored to have "killed a man" once,

and a man whose best friend is "the man who fixed the World's Series back in 1919" (73)?

In his article "Moral Attitudes and the Literary Experience," Lawrence W. Hyman explains, "Fitzgerald seems to spell out explicitly this conflict between our tendency to Judge fictional characters as we would real individuals and our willingness to suspend our moral judgments" (163). Hyman explores what many critics have called the failure of Nick's character, namely his inability to judge Gatsby and his confession that the man who gives his name to the book, "was exempt from my reaction —Gatsby, who represented everything for which I have unaffected scorn" (Fitzgerald 2). Hyman realizes that regardless whether Nick must be considered unreliable because of this statement, this statement proves Fitzgerald's genius through Nick, whose inability to condemn Gatsby is not a flaw in the narration but evidence of its perfection. Hyman explains that,

> This alternation between judging Gatsby as we would anyone who violated so many of our moral principles and exempting him from such judgment, and responding only to his "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life" pervades the entire novel. Gatsby escapes judgment for the same reason as any fictional character does: because he is placed in a context in which his relationship to other incidents in the novel takes on a greater reality, or at least forms a more coherent world, than his relationship to the actual world. (163)

The driving force behind the context of the character of Gatsby is the world that Fitzgerald has created and populated through Nick, and without the carefully designed

revelations and carefully hidden elements such a context would fall flat and leave Gatsby to take the full brunt of critical readers. Thale writes that Gatsby "is so grotesque that we could not possibly comprehend [him] on our own, could not identify ourselves in any way with [him]" (73). How different would *The Great Gatsby* be if we viewed Gatsby not as a sympathetic character, but as one we condemned as utterly grotesque, irrational, and immoral in all aspects of his life? Hyman summarizes the accomplishment of Fitzgerald in shaping the narrative to support a positive reading of Gatsby by explaining: "This Gatsby, not the New York gangster, who is trying to take away someone's wife; and it is this Gatsby created by the words of his novel, or by the memory of Nick Carraway, who is exempt from our moral strictures" (164). This is the most amazing thing about Fitzgerald's narrative. The plot and story of Gatsby would appear to be the tale of an evil and sinister man who is selfish and only is in life for his own pleasure. And yet, through the complicated process of Nick's narration, we are left with a character in Gatsby that many readers sympathize with, admire, and mourn.

The novel exemplifies Fitzgerald's ability to manipulate his readers and guide them into completing what otherwise would be an open-ended form, asking them, like many other modernist writers, to fashion a whole out of fragments. Fitzgerald shapes the plot and timeline of his tale in a modernist manner, relying on the reader to keep the events and storyline coherent and moving. The use of Nick Carraway as narrator allows Fitzgerald to guide both narrator and reader on a specific path. This path not only reveals the shattered dreams of Jay Gatz, but also it unveils the broken lives of the Lost Generation, who, forever chasing the ever-elusive American dream, yearn for a nostalgic past and strive for a more meaningful future. Nick is the way he is because

Fitzgerald needs a narrator that will seem human and will identify with his audience. In the end, Nick's apparent unreliability forces us to paddle a perpetually moving current —the novel's open-ended narration, which leads us inevitably to Nick's past and an imagined present, one the reader and Nick may share.

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