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What loving Gatsby does to the narration of a novel

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Abstract

This essay examines the narration in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* by posting that the novel's narrator, Nick Carraway, is unreliable and in love with protagonist Jay Gatsby. If love makes one blind, what does this do to the retelling of a story through a lover's eye? While critics supporting the idea of reading Nick as an unreliable narrator have provided different reasons for his fascination with Gatsby, this essay proposes that reading Nick as a queer character provide a more accurate and complete picture of his role as an unreliable narrator. This essay will also include an alternative view of the theme of the unobtainable 'American Dream'.

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Introduction

In a carefully crafted portrait of the 'Roaring Twenties', with themes of economic power, social and sexual freedom, material excess, idealism, and decadence, F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* has been linked to the idea of 'the American Dream', labeled a literary classic, and analyzed by scholars for decades. The novel is set mostly on Long Island and tells the complicated love story of the young, mysterious protagonist Jay Gatsby and his failed quest to take back his ex-lover Daisy Buchanan. The novel's narrator, Nick Carraway, moves in next to Gatsby's mansion in the spring of 1922, and tells the story in retrospect two years later. The narration and language in the novel have invited previous analysis of Nick's reliability regarding the disparity between what he says and what he does. The first-person narration invites a focus on Nick as a character, his background, his dreams, and his desires; ultimately resulting in more modern scholars exploring the possibility of reading him as a queer character (Cain 457. Tyson 348). This essay will combine elements from previous research to explore the reliability of Nick's narration in a queer reading of the novel.

If love makes one blind, what does this do to the retelling of a story through a lover's eye? This essay aims to show that when Nick's narration is scrutinized, the evidence of his romantic feelings toward Gatsby from a queer perspective provides an accurate and complete explanation of his role as an unreliable narrator. By challenging the traditional view of what role the 'American Dream' has in the novel, this essay will demonstrate how Gatsby fits the role of Nick's unobtainable dream.

Organizationally, this essay will open with a short introduction on how I will define an 'unreliable narrator' using Wayne Booth's concept of distance from his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction.* Using Booth's concept of distance, this essay will move on to demonstrate details of Nick's narration that reveal him to be unreliable, with support of other scholars such as Thomas Boyle, William Cain, and Kent Cartwright. I aim to highlight, using supporting research by Lois Tyson and Veronica Makowsky, how the different descriptions and focus in Nick's narration confirm his feelings towards Jay Gatsby. Finally, this essay will discuss the theme of the 'American Dream' as it relates to the novel and discuss what it represents in a queer reading of the novel, focusing on Nick Carraway's narration.

The Unreliable Narrator

To understand what an unreliable narrator is, as well as other terminology that is going to be used throughout this essay, I will go to Wayne C. Booth's book from 1961, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. The book is considered to be a classic, as it has transformed literary criticism with its accessible concepts and useful new terminology, such as "the implied author" and "the unreliable narrator". In his book, Booth observes that as soon as we start to think about all of the different narrative devices in fiction, we realize how "the embarrassing inadequacy of our traditional classification" limits us when we try to distinguish how narrative voices differ from each other. Booth argues that when describing literature, the same traditional terms might apply to two separate works of fiction but will not explain how they differ from each other or why one succeeds as a good narrative device while the other fails (149-150). Booth concludes that how the different parts of the work relate to each other is more significant than the parts themselves. To make this even more clear, he introduces the imagery of distance:

> In any reading experience there is an implied dialogue among author, narrator, the other characters, and the reader. Each of the four can range, in relation to each of the others, from identification to complete opposition, on any axis of value, moral, intellectual, aesthetic, and even physical. (Booth 155)

By exploring these variations of distance, we might come across space between these different facets and question what their relation to each other suggests (Booth 155). Moving forward, this essay will use *they* as a generic third-person singular pronoun when the gender is either unknown or irrelevant to the specific context. *The Implied Author* is who Booth describes as the person behind the scenes: "whether as stage manager, as puppeteer, or as an indifferent God" (151). In other words, the image the reader creates of the author when reading the literary work is the implied author and they might have nothing in common with the real author. The implied author, as Booth puts it, "carries the reader" through the reading experience where they have set the themes, such as the implied politics, manners, and norms within the literary universe (158). When a narrator's "beliefs and characteristics are shared by the implied author's", Booth classifies them as *undramatized*. More common is the *dramatized narrator*, who can be "as vivid as those they tell us about" and often differs a lot from the implied author (152). It is here we come to the question of whether we are listening to the story of a *reliable*

narrator or an *unreliable narrator.* Booth states that the most important distance is between the unreliable narrator and the implied author. The implied author silently judges the unreliable narrator as he carries the reader through the reading experience; the unreliable narrator might believe they have qualities that the implied author denies, and they might act or speak in disagreement with the norms of the literary universe (158). Booth additionally highlights that in fiction with a dramatized narrator, there are often *disguised narrators* "who are used to tell the audience what it needs to know, while seeming merely to act out their roles". For example, the nervous partner tries to convince the businessman that he is making a risky deal but the businessman, who is bold and determined to succeed, ignores it. When things start to go wrong, it has a major effect on the reader as this information has already been given indirectly (152-153). In other words, determining the reliability of a narrator using Booth's method is ultimately questioning, and comparing the distance between what the narrator says and does with everything else in the literary universe that the author has created.

Narration in *The Great Gatsby*

If we apply this analysis to *The Great Gatsby,* we can easily agree that the narrator, Nick Carraway, is a dramatized narrator, and in order to explore whether he is reliable or not, we need to establish his relation to the implied author's norms. In the first two paragraphs of the novel, the reader is immediately given an idea of the narrator, Nick. He starts by sharing the advice he received from his father when he was young, something he has carried with him ever since:

> "Whenever you feel like criticizing any one," he told me,
> "just remember that all the people in this world haven't had
> the advantages that you've had." (Fitzgerald 7)

As a result of this he claims, "I'm inclined to reserve all judgments" (ibid.) and this openness has given him insights, secrets, and trust from other young men to the effect "that in college I was unjustly accused of being a politician" (ibid.). He continues by saying that even though most revelations were rarely original, he would remind himself of his father's advice that "reserving judgement is a matter of infinite hope" (ibid.). In the next paragraph, he admits that he has reached the limit of his judgements; as he returned to the Midwest from the East, he "wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever" and whatever

interest he had in "the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men" is gone (ibid. 8). By admitting this, the image of a man mindful of his moral judgements alludes the reader to believe that he might be trusted. It appears that the narrator and the implied author does not seem to be far apart on the axis of morals.

In the first chapter of the novel, we find out that the action of the story, a series of events that spanned the duration of three summer months in 1922, is being told by Nick in retrospect. Nick is a *self-conscious narrator*, aware that he is writing a book and when he states: "No – Gatsby turned out alright in the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest" (Fitzgerald 8). We are given information and knowledge that no characters in the novel know as the story proceeds. Booth states that if we remove the knowledge that Nick gives us in the beginning of *The Great Gatsby*, young Nick "would be an unreliable witness to the events"; however, because we already have been provided with this knowledge, Booth argues that this confirms that "the older Nick provides thoroughly reliable guidance" (176). Although certain events may have a lasting impact, a substantial amount of time has passed, and I would argue that questioning the passing of time could challenge Booth's statement regarding Nick's reliability. If young Nick cannot be relied on to accurately tell the story because he does not know how it ends, relying on older Nick must imply that the knowledge of how things end does not impact him in a way that would influence his storytelling. Booth proposes that Nick has "minor involvement" in the novel, but he also states that Nick has "deep personal concerns" (154, 158). Even though Nick is a self-conscious narrator with the knowledge of how things end, he is limited in what Booth refers to as *privilege*: "complete privilege is what we usually call omniscience" and the most important privilege is "obtaining an inside view of another character" something Nick cannot do (160-161). With these two aspects in mind, I propose that the passing of time adds more doubt to his reliability as a trustworthy narrator; his deep personal concerns both influence his storytelling as well as his involvement in the action of events.

In his article "Unreliable Narration in the Great Gatsby", Thomas Boyle criticizes Booth's contention regarding Nick as a reliable narrator by referring to Nick's questionable silences (22). When Nick discovers Tom Buchannan's infidelity with Myrtle Wilson, his reaction plays well with his purported interest in upholding order and morals: "my own instinct was to telephone immediately for the police" (Fitzgerald 20). When he is asked to set up a meeting between ex-lovers Daisy Buchanan and Jay Gatsby, however, he claims that the favor would be "such a little thing" (ibid. 77). Boyle additionally points out that Nick never questions many

of the suspicious things involving Gatsby. For example, in a conversation about Gatsby's past, Boyle argues that our response to Gatsby's "unbelievable ignorance of geography" cannot be the same as the narrator's (24):

> "What part of the middle-west?" [Nick] inquired casually.
> "San Francisco."
> "I see."
> (Fitzgerald, 65)

Boyle moves on to highlight that the names of Gatsby's guests, the Snells, Hammerheads, Belugas, Whitebaits, and Fishguards, work as puns, "both comic and serious", to the underlying message that something *fishy* is going on (24). As the novel proceeds, Nick becomes more and more involved and his purported virtues of honesty and morality become more and more diffuse. Boyle argues that we cannot accept Booth's claim that Nick only has a minor involvement in the story as his choice to be silent regarding Daisy's involvement in Myrtle's death ultimately ends in Gatsby's murder as well as Wilson's suicide (22).

William Cain highlights in his article "American Dreaming: Really Reading The Great Gatsby" that a lot of previous research has put the focus on Gatsby's pursuit of Daisy, and although the conflict between Tom and Gatsby has prompted much interesting analysis, the narration of the story should make us turn our attention to Nick: "in certain respects, Nick is the most interesting of the novel's characters" (457). While Cain first suggests that the enchanting imagery and bewitching language in the novel represents "the magic, unreality and impossibility of Gatsby's project to reconnect with Daisy", he later acknowledges that Nick's reflections on their interactions "may disclose more about him than it does about Gatsby" (455-456). Additionally, in another article about Nick's narration, Kent Cartwright argues that through the "subtle distinction between representation and explanation" the reader is left with two types of impressions: "one created through descriptions of places, things, and events, and another created by Nick's responses and reflections" (220). As a matter of fact, if we choose to accept Nick as an unreliable narrator, his descriptions of events and other characters only confirm that he is concurrently revealing information that is as much about himself as anyone else. He moves East after the war because he feels restless, notably, something he also notices in Gatsby:

> This quality was continually breaking through his punctilious manner in the shape of restlessness. He was never quite still; there was always a tapping foot somewhere

> or the impatient opening and closing of a hand. (Fitzgerald 63)

Another key point mentioned by Cain is Nick's "somewhat cavalier" decision to go into the bond business; Cain describes him as "not single-minded or ambitious, not motivated by a burning dream of his own" (457). With this in mind, it does not seem surprising that in the beginning of the novel he feels lonely at West Egg until one morning when a man asks for directions and after helping him Nick says: "and as I walked on I was lonely no longer. I was a guide, a pathfinder, an original settler" (Fitzgerald 9). While the qualities of tolerance, honesty, morality, and order are things Nick values deeply, I believe that the restlessness and desire to be helpful are important attributes in Nick that we must acknowledge. I believe it explains why, as Cartwright points out, during the course of the novel "Nick develops a peculiar rigidity" and a "growing determination to perceive events in a fixed way" (220). As he loses the moral high ground from which to defend his decisions and actions with the truth, his narration reveals a story of a restless man searching for adventure who will compromise his previously stated values as he tells the story of "Gatsby who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn" (Fitzgerald 8).

The previously discussed sources, which I have used to examine Nick's unreliability, have made attempts to explain Nick's fascination with Gatsby without notable success. Thomas Boyle claims that it is Gatsby's refusal of compromise that make him an "attractive enigma" to Nick; William Cain suggests that it is the trait of imagination; and Kent Cartwright suggests that Gatsby wins Nick over "by an appeal to imagination" (Boyle 23. Cain 458. Cartwright 224.) Although I agree that there is some truth in these observations, I believe turning to a queer reading of the novel will provide a more complete explanation of events as well as Nick's role as an unreliable narrator.

A Queer Reading

In an article about queer reading strategies, Jenny Björklund and Ann-Sofie Lönngren make an entertaining comparison between interpreting literary texts and magic tricks; "after intense study of a text, we suddenly see something we did not see a moment ago" – like the rabbit being pulled out of a magician's hat (196). Wayne Booth states that when we discover that we are dealing with an unreliable narrator "the total effect of the work he relays to us is transformed"

and while this most likely causes some frustration, Kent Cartwright states: “some defenders of Nick[‘s reliability] have argued that “the book makes no sense – if Carraway is repudiated”” (Booth 158. Cartwright 219). I would argue that in the transformation mentioned by Booth, inviting a queer analysis of the text will open new possibilities to us. Björklund and Lönngren propose that “the task for the queer reader is to *emphasize* and *highlight* structures” and the purpose of the research “aims at making visible what may be invisible to some readers” (197).

Early in the story, it becomes clear that the greatness connected with Gatsby is amplified by the mystery and uncertainty surrounding him. He is not introduced in person until chapter three, but his excellence has been described from beginning in Nick’s narration: “If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him” (Fitzgerald 8). The reader is first introduced to his spectacular mansion “it was a factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy” (ibid. 10-11). Secondly, after a brief mention of his name at dinner with the Buchanan’s, Nick finally sees a figure in the dark across his lawn: “Something in his leisurely movements and the secure position of his feet upon the lawn suggested that it was Mr. Gatsby himself” (ibid. 24-25). Nick is just about to call out to him when he changes his mind and watches as Gatsby stretches out with trembling hands towards the other side of the water. Nick follows his gaze and when he looks back, Gatsby is gone. At the first of Gatsby’s parties which Nick attends, a guest says: “Somebody told me they thought he killed a man once” and then another guest adds “that he was a German spy during the war” (ibid. 45). Nick describes how they shiver and observes: “It was testimony to the romantic speculation he inspired that there were whispers about him from those who found little that it was necessary to whisper about in this world” (ibid. 45). His comment reads as a failed attempt to distance himself from these whispers, maybe as an continuous attempt to “reserve all judgement” (ibid. 3), however, Nick’s interest in this unknown man is undeniable; he spends most of the part looking for him and feels embarrassed when he fails. When Gatsby finally enters the story, it almost feels anticlimactic:

> “This is an unusual party for me. I haven’t even seen the host. I live over there—" I waved my hand at the invisible hedge in the distance, “and this man Gatsby sent over his chauffeur with an invitation.”
> For a moment he looked at me as if he failed to understand.
> “I’m Gatsby,” he said suddenly.

> "What!" I exclaimed. "Oh, I beg your pardon."
> "I thought you knew, old sport. I'm afraid I'm not a very good host." (Fitzgerald 48-49)

Almost as soon as Gatsby is introduced, the butler calls him and he disappears, but first the reader gets to enjoy Nick's first impression of Gatsby who smiles understandingly:

> —much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced—or seemed to face—the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on *you* with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just so far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey. (Fitzgerald 49)

While the mystery that surrounds Gatsby is mostly what sparks Nick's interest, after reading this paragraph, I believe it is not surprising that Nick's fascination and interest quickly grow into something that more likely could be described as infatuation.

The reader gets to observe a summer filled with parties, alcohol, and music; everything is in excess and the atmosphere of social and sexual freedom pervades the novel, creating an interesting backdrop for a somewhat conventional narrator. In her book *Critical Theory Today* Lois Tyson observes the novel's "apparent obsession with sexual transgression": the illicit romantic triangles between Daisy-Gatsby-Tom, Daisy-Tom-Myrtle, and Tom-Myrtle-Wilson; some of the characters implicitly having pre-marital sex; and the couples mentioned at Gatsby's parties such as "Hubert Auerbach and Mr. Chrystie's wife" as well as "Miss Claudia Hip with a man reputed to be her chauffeur" (346). Tyson argues that the heterosexual plot line driven by Gatsby's quest to take back his ex-lover Daisy is "shadowed, however, by a homoerotic sub-text" in the narration of Nick (345). Tyson observes, with support of George Chauncey's work on the gay history of New York City, how Nick "fits the profile of thousands of young men who discovered their gay orientation during World War I" (351). Chauncey writes that the mobilization of the war removed men from "the supervision of their families and small-town neighborhoods", increasing their possibility of exploring their homosexuality and that after the

war “the growing visibility of gay institutions in [New York City] in the 1920s” points to a new acceptance that could not be found in small-town America (Tyson 351). We can compare this with how the Midwesterner Nick, after the war feels restless and decides to go East to the city – where he describes how he enjoys “the racy, adventurous feel of it at night” (Tyson 352. Fitzgerald 57). Tyson highlights that when we view Nick as a queer character, his attempt to convince the reader to see him “as the conservative, almost puritanical, consciousness of the novel”, especially regarding romantic matters, rather supports the view of his hidden sexuality (353).

As the novel is set in 1922, the traditional roles assigned to women are changing, and this creates an ambiguous situation for both the characters and the narrator. The 19th amendment was ratified in the beginning of the 1920’s, giving women the right to vote. This offered a new type of freedom and influenced a new lifestyle: lighter clothing, shorter hair, drinking, and smoking (Cain 458). The indications of these changes are visible in the novel through Nick’s observations at the parties he attends: “enthusiastic meetings between women who never knew each other’s names” (Fitzgerald 42), “old men pushing young girls backward in eternal graceless circles”, and “single girls dancing individualistically” (ibid. 47). At the end of the night most girls are very drunk and Nick remarks that “[m]ost of the remaining women were now having fights with men said to be their husbands” and “[t]he wives were sympathizing with each other in slightly raised voices” (ibid. 52). Through his narration Nick observes the new roles of women, but he does not engage much further. We encounter several unnamed women in Nick’s life. He lets a brief affair with a nameless girl from New Jersey “blow quietly away” after “her brother began throwing mean looks” (ibid. 56). Before he gets involved with Jordan Baker, he feels a need to end things with the girl he has been sending letters to back home “signing them: ‘Love, Nick,’” because he is “full of interior rules that act as breaks on my desires” (ibid. 59). He seems to be trying to do the morally right thing in these situations. At the end of the novel, however, when describing a drunk woman being carried on a stretcher by four men a night in the city, Nick points out that they stop at the wrong house “no one knows the woman’s name, and no one cares”, including himself (ibid. 167). Tyson argues that “Nick seems to go out of his way to be sure we see him as an active heterosexual” while Veronica Makowsky proposes that “for Nick, women are an inchoate mass” (Tyson 353. Makowsky 37). With this in mind, as the novel progresses, I believe that just like Nick’s narration reveals him compromising on the truth of events, it also reveals his disinterest in the women he encounters during this time.

Before Nick meets Gatsby, he attends a party with Tom Buchanan and Tom's mistress Myrtle, where he meets another important character, Mr. McKee, who lives in the same house. Nick describes McKee as "a pale, feminine man" (Fitzgerald 33). He notices some shaving cream on his clean-shaven face and describes his greetings as "most respectful" (ibid.). Later in the evening, when McKee has fallen asleep in a chair, Nick takes out his handkerchief and wipes McKee's cheek from "the remain of the spot of dried lather that had worried me all afternoon" (ibid. 39). Nick is unimpressed with the rest of the party guests; he describes McKee's wife as "shrill, languid, handsome and horrible" and mentions several times his desire to leave (ibid. 33). While he is standing and looking out a window Nick tells the reader his thoughts: "I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life" (ibid. 38). The party ends when Tom hits Myrtle; McKee leaves, having been woken by the commotion; Nick follows. When McKee invites him to lunch one day, he answers "I'll be glad to" (ibid. 40) and a somewhat unclear scene follows:

> … I was standing beside his bed and he was sitting up between the sheets, clad in his underwear, with a great portfolio in his hands.
> "Beauty and the Beast… Loneliness… Old Grocery Horse… Brook'n Bridge…"
> Then I was lying half asleep in the cold lower level of the Pennsylvania Station, staring at the morning *Tribune* and waiting for the four o'clock train. (Fitzgerald 40)

Tyson concludes that the scene "can be interpreted as nothing more than a representation of their drunkenness" (347), as Nick earlier confesses to having only been drunk twice in his life, "the second time was that afternoon" (Fitzgerald 32). It is, however, difficult not to question what happens between these two men, and what the narration suggests of the different ways in which Nick describes McKee and his wife. What can we make of his focus on the spot of lather on McKee's face, or Nick's desire to leave but inability to do so until he can follow McKee? Then Nick is in the man's bedroom, where McKee is sitting in only his underwear, and then nothing, a blackout from suggested intoxication, until he is at the station waiting for the train at four in the morning. Tyson argues that this scene by itself does not "carry much weight", but it is an important part of a queer perspective (348). Similarly, when focusing on the disparity between Nick's perception and projection, the difference in descriptions between Mr. McKee and his wife emphasizes the importance of the queer dimension in his storytelling.

William Cain highlights that Nick "is a reader as much as we are, a reader of Gatsby who is struggling to understand this fabulously rich man who is captivating and mysterious, at once intriguing and absurd", and Gatsby's influence over Nick is something I believe we can see clearly in his narration of Daisy (456). While Thomas Boyle argues that "Nick's failure to recognize [Daisy's] vanity and stupidity" is because he is in love with her as well, referring to the description he gives of her after her "vapid anecdote of the butler's nose" (25):

> For a moment the last sunshine fell with romantic affection upon her glowing face; her voice compelled me forward breathlessly as I listened. (Fitzgerald 18-19)

Nick's unreliable narration demand us to focus on what details he chooses to repeat and explore the reasons why. Daisy's voice is the most frequently feature commented on in Nick's description of her, from their first meeting till the last, and while he finds a "singing compulsion" in her "low thrilling voice" (Fitzgerald 14) he cannot seem to find an explanation for this until Gatsby states "her voice is full of money" (ibid. 113):

> That was it. I'd never understood before. It was full of money – that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it …. High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl…. (Fitzgerald 113-114)

If we go back to the afternoon when Daisy and Gatsby are reunited, Lois Tyson suggests that Nick "want[s] to be involved in [Gatsby's] personal life in any way he can", and by helping them reunite "Nick's position is parallel to that of Daisy, as he too, is getting a glimpse" into Gatsby's mansion (Tyson 351). During the tour, the line between perception and projection become very diffuse as Nick's reports of Gatsby's thought and feelings seem to reflect more on himself. The green light at Daisy's dock across the bay has become a symbol for Gatsby, "a fresh, green breast of the new world" (Fitzgerald 171). After he points it out to her and she puts "her arm through his abruptly" (ibid., 89), Cain questions whether Gatsby is actually feeling the emotions "Nick attributes to him" (451):

> 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. (Fitzgerald 89-90)

Nick observes Gatsby's infatuation with Daisy, and as he takes her hand and she whispers something in his ear, Nick states: "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" (Fitzgerald 92). Cartwright observes that these reflections do not seem to come from a man who just witnessed lovers reuniting, "but rather the more hardened and distant judgments of the man who has seen further to the ruination of Gatsby's dream" (226). I believe Booth is mistaken, and that Nick's "failure to recognize her vanity and stupidity" is not because he is in love with Daisy (25). He is, however, fascinated by her because of what she means to Gatsby; exemplified through the older Nick's knowledge of how things end blending into the reflections and storytelling of the younger Nick.

Critics have viewed Nick's relationship with Jordan Baker as one of the most important in the novel, arguing that she functions as a plot device which provides insight into Daisy's past with Gatsby. Makowsky argues, however, that if her character had been developed further, "she could have supported and complicated" both the theme of the American Dream and the role of women in the novel (28). Booth, in a statement explaining the importance of other characters when dealing with an unreliable narrator, claims that "most work contain disguised narrators who are used to tell the audience what it needs to know, while seeming merely to act out their roles"; this is something I believe we can find in Jordan Baker's role (152). Analogously, Tyson demonstrates how through a queer reading of the novel, Jordan Baker works as a "repository of gay signs" and emphasizes how meaningful it is that she is one of the two characters in "whom Nick takes most personal interest" (350):

> I enjoyed looking at her. She was a slender, small-breasted girl, with an erect carriage which she accentuated by throwing her body backward at the shoulders like a young cadet. (Fitzgerald 16)

If we focus on Nick's descriptions of her, as Tyson puts it, she is "frequently described in masculine terms" (349). Even when she is dressed up at one of Gatsby's parties, Nick describes how she wears even her most feminine attire "like sports clothes – there was a jauntiness about

her movements as if she had first learned to walk upon golf course on clean, crisp mornings" (Fitzgerald 51). She makes her living as a professional golf player, which was at the time a male dominated sport, and Nick feels "flattered" to be seen with "a golf champion" (ibid. 57). When Nick talks about her personality she is often described as "bored" (ibid.), "contemptuous" (ibid. 16) and "incurably dishonest" (ibid. 58), traits which become more interesting when reading Nick as an unreliable narrator. He adds, "dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply" and the reader cannot know if the rumor about her cheating at a golf tournament is true or not (ibid.). Makowsky notes that Nick's narration of Jordan makes it hard to investigate her honesty due to the lack of textual evidence as we are limited to his observations (32). Makowsky proposes "that we are meant to accept Jordan's dishonesty as a fact, not just a rationalization invented by Nick" because of how he throughout the novel tries not to blame anyone for "their ways of using the illegitimate to compensate for lack of legitimate advantages" (32-33). As a result, it becomes clear that Nick views being a woman as a disadvantage. Both Makowsky and Tyson observe that in the end of the novel when Nick and Jordan say their final goodbyes, Jordan has seen through Nick's self-deception when she comments on a conversation they had about driving, earlier that summer (Tyson 354-355. Makowsky 37):

> "You said a bad driver was only safe until she met another bad driver? Well, I met another bad driver, didn't I? I mean it was careless of me to make such a wrong guess. I thought you were rather an honest, straightforward person. I thought it was your secret pride."
> "I'm thirty" I said. "I'm five years too old to lie to myself and call it honor"' (Fitzgerald 168)

The focus Nick puts on Jordan's dishonesty eventually become the key to recognizing Nick's own dishonesty. When we recognize the unreliability of Nick's narration, Jordan functions not only as a plot device providing insight into Daisy's past with Gatsby, but as Nick's self-reflection on confessing his untruthfulness, and his queerness; as well as a reinforcement of our understanding of his disinterest in anyone but Gatsby.

The American Dream

Many scholars have identified Daisy as the embodiment of the 'American Dream' for Gatsby and argued that his motivation to do anything for this dream is ultimately the reason behind Nick's fascination with him. Tyson Boyle suggests a link to Herman Melville's short story *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, because of Joseph Conrad's influence on Fitzgerald, and Melville's influence on Conrad: "[S]uggesting a possible similarity" between the two narrators. By comparing the unreliable narrator in Melville's story and his representation of total negation with Gatsby's impossible quest to repeat the past, Boyle demonstrates that Nick's compromising nature is drawn to Gatsby's unwillingness to compromise for his dream (23). Similarly, Cain suggests that the defining trait of the American Dreamer in Gatsby is imagination and how this "power comes first from saying No" (458). Gatsby can create a new life for himself because he does not accept his past: "His parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people – his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all" (Fitzgerald 94). It is this drive that accelerates him forward. Victoria Makowsky observes that the qualities Nick praises in Gatsby in the beginning of the novel, "the extraordinary gift for hope" and "a romantic readiness" (Fitzgerald 8), can similarly be seen in Jordan's story as well. She leaves her home at sixteen, just like Gatsby, her professional golf career luring her to the promise of the "fresh, green breast of the new world" (Makowsky 30. Fitzgerald 171.). While the similarities between Jordan and Gatsby support the reasons for Nick's interest in her, they undermine the argument that Nick's fascination with Gatsby only stems from his determination to do anything to achieve his dream.

When critics started exploring the reliability of Nick's storytelling, the traditional connection to the American Dream was left open to much broader interpretations. Kent Cartwright writes that the "traditional estimates of *The Great Gatsby*", namely reading the narration of the novel as "straightforward criticism of the American Dream", stem from a generation of "neoclassical and formalist critics who tended to believe in the final, tough truth" (218). Cartwright continues by observing how the traditional view left readers feeling hopeless at the end of the novel: "Nick's final vision seems somehow to betray his story" but when accepting Nick's narration as unreliable, however, there could be hope that "the dream lives beyond Gatsby's death" (219). Cartwright proposes that because of Nick's failure "to believe, even in his own imagination /…/ [he] pays the much dearer price for living too long with no dream", unlike Gatsby, who dies for his. Cartwright is referring to the passage in the novel, the moments before Gatsby is shot, when

Nick is contemplating how Gatsby might feel as he is waiting for Daisy's phone call: "he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream" (Cartwright 323. Fitzgerald 152). Nick continues by saying, "I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn't believe it would come and perhaps he no longer cared" and continues by recognizing the fear Gatsby must have felt recognizing "a new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about…" (Fitzgerald 152). In this paragraph, even though it is highly influenced by the fact that Nick knows Gatsby will soon die, I believe we can recognize the wishful thinking Nick attributes to Gatsby. While the idea of the unobtainable American dream often has been connected in parallel with Gatsby's failed mission to take back Daisy, I believe the narration reveal Nick wishfully imagining Gatsby letting go of his old dream of Daisy and looking ahead to something new.

As show throughout this essay, the focus in Nick's narration of other characters reveals as much about himself as it does those characters, something that is clearly visible in his narration of Gatsby. As previously exemplified by Lois Tyson, Nick fits into the profile of a gay man after the war, it is the trait of restlessness that brings him to New York, a restlessness he also sees in Gatsby; notably, the first conversation between the two men is about the war experience. After the conversation, Nick describes Gatsby's understanding smile and how "it understood you just as far as you wanted it be understood, believed in you just as far as you would like to believe in yourself" and it is hard not to feel the profound importance it has on Nick (Fitzgerald 49). He then shares that "some time before [Gatsby] introduced himself I'd got a strong impression that he was picking his words with care" – a quality, certainly important as well as reflective with the narrator himself (ibid.). To go back to something mentioned even earlier in this essay, William Cain describes Nick as "not single-minded or ambitious, not motivated by a burning dream of his own" (457). After Nick helps a man with directions at West Egg, however, he declares himself "lonely no longer. I was a guide, a pathfinder, an original settler" (Fitzgerald 9). Kent Cartwright points out, after accepting Nick as unreliable, his observational narration reveals his imagination to be "the strongest part of his character" (231). As to the limited insight Nick has of the inner thoughts and feelings of the other characters, he makes up for this with a colorful responsiveness to the world around him with magical images and storytelling. After crossing the Queensboro Bridge with Gatsby the first time, Nick describes "the city rising up across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps /…/ its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world" and then he declares his final thoughts, "anything can happen now /…/ [e]ven Gatsby could happen, without any particular wonder" (Fitzgerald 68). At the end of the

novel, when Gatsby tells Nick about how he fell in love with Daisy, and how she fell in love with him, he says:

> "…Well, there I was, way off my ambitions, getting deeper in love every minute, and all of a sudden I didn't care. What was the use of doing great things if I could have a better time telling her what I was going to do?" (Fitzgerald 141-142)

The narration goes back to Nick who recalls how on Gatsby and Daisy's final afternoon together they sat wrapped in each other's arms in tranquility "as if to give them a deep memory for the long parting the next day promised" (ibid.). While retelling a memory from Gatsby's past, Nick's words reflect his own story, as Nick and Gatsby spend the night and the morning quietly together. The melancholy during that morning can easily be read as a result of Gatsby finally realizing that he has lost Daisy. I believe, however, that the melancholy is also from the older Nick's feelings bleeding into younger Nick's storytelling – the knowledge that soon everything will be over. After missing two trains, Nick eventually leaves for work and recalls with pride the only compliment he ever paid Gatsby: "They're a rotten crowd /…/ You're worth the whole damn bunch put together" (Fitzgerald 145). In a final description from the narrator, we get to view the greatness of Gatsby through his eyes:

> and then his face broke into that radiant and understanding smile, as if we'd been in ecstatic cahoots on that fact all the time. His gorgeous pink rag of a suit made a bright spot of color against the white steps… (Fitzgerald 145)

I believe that in Nick's narration of the mysterious and intriguing Gatsby, the reader concurrently observes two stories; one about the big dreamer Jay Gatsby's quest to take back Daisy Buchanan, and the other about the conventional Midwesterner Nick falling in love with Gatsby, and how the two dreams will forever be unobtainable.

Conclusion

This essay has explored the reliability of the narration in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*. I have claimed that the narrator Nick Carraway develops romantic feelings for the novel's protagonist Jay Gatsby, which influences his storytelling. By combining previous research supporting Nick's unreliability with research supporting a queer reading of the novel, I have demonstrated how these theories complement each other when presenting Nick's role as an unreliable narrator.

I have started by introducing the concept of distance to determine the reliability of a narrator from Wayne Booth's seminal book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* where he highlights that the most important distance is between the unreliable narrator and the implied author. While Booth states that Nick has a minor involvement in the novel and that his narration is reliable, I have questioned these claims with support from other critics. By highlighting questions regarding the passing of time and Nick's limited privilege of the inside view of the other characters, I have presented reasons to doubt his reliability and argued that his personal concerns effect the development of the story. The introductory passage in the novel concerning morals and order is something Nick tries to uphold, however, as he gets more involved with Gatsby he starts to compromise on the truth in his storytelling. The distance between the reader and the narrator grows as we are given more clues of this by the implied author as the novel unravels.

This essay has additionally demonstrated how the most commented traits and descriptions in Nick's narration of the other characters can be seen as reflections on something of significance in his involvement with Gatsby. I have argued that the qualities of restlessness and imagination he notices in Gatsby are important traits in his own characteristics. I have proposed that Nick's focus on Jordan's dishonesty can be seen as an unconscious reflection of himself until he eventually confesses to his own dishonesty. I have also argued that during the course of the novel the older Nick's knowledge of how things end bleeds over into the younger Nick's storytelling, something that can be seen in the narration of Daisy's voice.

To support my claim of Nick's romantic feelings towards Gatsby, I have focused on the changing role of women in the 1920s and how this is dealt with in the novel, Nick's interaction with Mr. McKee and how his narration suggests a hidden queerness. Consequently, thorough a queer reading, I have attempted to reveal that the unreliable narrator Nick, does not only tell a story about Jay Gatsby chasing the unobtainable dream of Daisy, but his own story about the conventional Midwesterner Nick and his unobtainable romantic dream of Gatsby.

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