



Interpretation on the Reliability of Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract

This article attempts to discuss the reliability of Nick Carraway as narrator in *The Great Gatsby*. Considering the fact that he represents the authorial voice and supports the implicit moral code of the author, however, Nick is enough to be reliable in his narration. His perception, interpretation and evaluation of the objects in his work are consistent with the norms implied by the author. This paper takes Nick as a starting point to discuss the reliability of Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*.

Key words: *The Great Gatsby*; Reliability; Implied author; Narrative

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1. INTRODUCTION

Set in New York and Long Island, *The Great Gatsby* describes the love tragedy of Gatsby and Daisy, but is an actual narrative of the great “American past”, vividly proclaiming the disillusioned process of the “American Dream” in the 1920s and firmly establishing Fitzgerald’s giant position in the American literary world. The traditional view of Nick’s character as a narrator is that he is very reliable, honest and ethical. However, this

critical position has been challenged by some critics who view Nick as highly unreliable, dishonest, and even unethical. Actually, F. Scott Fitzgerald doesn’t seem to have implied any unreliability in the story’s narration. Fitzgerald’s letters to his editor, Max Perkins, concerning *The Great Gatsby* contain no mentioning of Carraway’s unreliability. Max Perkins writes, “You adopted exactly the right method of telling it, that of employing a narrator who is more of a spectator than an actor: this puts the reader upon a point of observation on a higher level than that on which the characters stand and at a distance that gives perspective” (Fitzgerald & Perkins, 1971, p.82). Perkins was persuaded by Carraway’s narration and believed that he could give readers the most profound understanding of the story and the characters. Until 1966, critics like E. Fred Carlisle, who calls Carraway “mature” and “informed” saw Carraway as reliable (Carlisle, 1966, p.351).

2. THE NARRATOR’S RELIABILITY

Abbot has given definitions to each of these terms in his book *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (2007) in which voice is defined as a question of who is we “hear” doing the narrating in narration. Abbot divides voices into first-person, third-person, and second-person. Among them, the first two are the most commonly used, and the third-person is rarely seen in literary works, just doing some experiments. Chinese scholar Tan Junqiang distinguishes between the voices in biographies and those in novels. Readers will not doubt that the voice in the autobiography is the author’s voice. He believes that the sound in the novel is closely related to the narrator, and it restricts the narrative process of the novel and the characters in the narrated events (Tan, 2008, pp.49-52). Gerald Prince (1987, p.102) views it as a set of signs charactering the narrator, and more generally, the narrating instance, and governing the relations between

narrating and narrative text as well as between narrating and narrated. He also makes a distinction between voice and point of view to the effect that the voice stresses who speaks while point of view emphasizes more on who perceives.

In terms of sound, in the story, the “primary narrator” Nick Caraway uses “I” to tell the whole story. This often happens in the novel, and the narrator is dramatized; the “secondary narrator” will also be the first One person tells their story. For example, Jordan begins to talk about Gatsby’s past in the first person “I”. The conversion between the third person and the first person helps to enhance the reliability of the story. It is generally believed that the first-person narrative resonates between the narrator and the characters, allowing readers to enjoy the process of the narrator’s narration of events, as if they had witnessed and experienced it firsthand. Therefore, the first-person narrative is more vivid and true (Jin, 1987, p.189). It is generally accepted that the autobiographies are usually written with the first person. As Tan Junqiang suggests, voice in autobiographies is naturally the author’s own voice. The author’s own voice ought to be believed as true and reliable. Nick narrates with the first person “I” as if he recounts his own story leaving readers to be convinced of his capacity of being a reliable narrator. In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick is chosen to be the focal figure involved in most of the story, although parts of it are revealed through old Gatsby, Wolfshiem and Jordan Baker. As Wallace says, a story can have multiple focal points. The author also chose several other focal points to help Nick tell a solid story. Genette divided the focalizer into external focus and internal focus. More precisely, the focalizer can play a role in the story, which means that the focalizer is the dramatic narrator in Booth’s words. In this story, the author chose Nick as the internal focus to convince the reader and enhance the truth of the story. Internal focus can provide not only what the focalizer sees, but also what he or she feels inside, as opposed to external focus, in which the focalizer is simply an observer who cannot see the inner world of the character. In this story, the reader can see not only what is happening to the focus, but sometimes his psychological world. Here is a psychological description of Nick. It happens when Nick sees Gatsby’s palace. The house was so brightly lit that he mistook it for a wild party.

“At first I thought it was another party, a wild rout that had resolved itself into “hide and go seek” or sardines in the box with all the house thrown open to the game. But there wasn’t a sound. Only wind in the trees which blew the wires and made the lights off and on again as if the house had winked into darkness.”

(Fitzgerald, 2008, p.73)

Nick is directly involved in most of the story, so his account of Gatsby seems very reliable. Nick is not only a storyteller, but also a “dramatic narrator” from the Midwest who attends Gatsby’s magnificent party, where

he meets the man. He is a participant in the story, and his contact with Gatsby convinces the reader that he is telling a true story. Nick merely recounts his experience with Gatsby without telling the reader that what he sees is a true story. For this reason, his story seems more believable to the reader. The first paragraph of Chapter 5 strikes us as something that really happens in Nick’s life, because the “I” indicates that the narrator, Nick, is personally involved in the story. The whole scene is focused on Nick. The reader seems to have witnessed the painting there and then.

“When I came home to West Egg that night I was afraid for a moment that my house was on fire. Two o’clock and the whole corner of the peninsula was blazing with light which fell unreal on the shrubbery and made thin elongating glints upon the roadside wires. Turning a corner I saw that it was Gatsby’s house, lit from tower to cellar.”

(Fitzgerald, 2008, p.78)

What the reader can feel is a picture of a magnificent building illuminated by lights, and a resonant tremor can be felt from his description. The internal focalizer is directly involved in most of the story, making the novel more vivid and reliable. The author chose Nick, who witnessed Gatsby’s lavish party and ultimately died, to prove that this story is not fictional. Gatsby represents a phenomenon in American society, which is fully reflected in Nick, who has countless face-to-face contacts.

3. A RELIABLE NARRATOR AND THE IMPLIED AUTHOR

In *The Great Gatsby*, the author chose Nick, hoping to show readers a realistic fact and convince readers that what he is narrating is a real American social phenomenon. For this point, Nick must be reliable; otherwise, this story may be seen as a fictional rather than a real Gatsby story. Booth (1983, p.211) points out that the reliable narrator is the dramatic spokesperson of the implicit author. In this story, Nick plays the dramatic spokesperson of the implicit author. The implicit author’s sympathy for Gatsby makes Nick a reliable narrator, and his sympathy for Gatsby is clearly reflected in the story. What Nick wants to show his readers is a true story. From the perspective of the distance between the narrator and the implicit author, the reliability of the narrator Nick can be measured by the value axis. Booth (1983, p.155) concludes that “each of the four, author, narrator, the other characters, the reader 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”. When talking about the distance between the narrator and the implicit author, Booth further pointed out that this distance may be moral, intellectual, physical or temporal.

From the perspective of the moral value axis, Nick and the implicit author have the same morality in this story.

To prove this, it is necessary to find out what the implicit author wants to express through the novel. First of all, it is obvious that the implicit author is eager to present a true story that reflects the United States in the early 20th century, when the United States enjoyed rapid economic growth, urban expansion, commercial prosperity, and improved people's living standards. However, beneath the surface of prosperity, there are hidden evils that accompany economic prosperity. The gap between the poor and the rich is widening. It is not surprising that they continue to speculate and gamble in the financial market. Nick lives in the West Egg district. There is a bay between the East Egg district and the West Egg district. The East Egg district is depicted as a white palace, and his own house is an eye-catcher. There is one important thing in the story that deserves the reader's attention, and that is the 1919 World Baseball Championship. The 1919 World Professional Baseball Championship was a big scandal, and it was actually manipulated by a gambler. When Nick remembered that the World Professional Baseball Championship had been set in 1919, he was as shocked as the implied author. He could not imagine that a person could start the game with the faith of 50 million people. Nick not only brings an objective and complete story to readers, thus realizing his reliability. In addition, by reading carefully, we can easily feel that the implied author has the same sympathy for Gatsby as Nick. Nick's sympathy for Gatsby is easy to see from the story, he was able to remain calm among the gossip. Nick understands how difficult it is to rise successfully, but he himself failed in the bond business, and he went to the west to prove this. Nick attended Gatsby's funeral and only three people attended. Nick "tried to think about Gatsby then for a moment but he was already too far away" and he "could only remember, without resentment, that Daisy hadn't sent a message or flower." Because there were few people present, he felt sad. As for the moral axis discussed earlier, it can be seen that the story is full of sympathy. On the axis of perception, the novel presents Gatsby's tragic story and the disillusionment of the American dream for a long time. This should be the common interpretation of Nick and the implicit author.

4. FUNCTIONS OF NICK BEING A RELIABLE NARRATOR

Fitzgerald maintains Carraway's reliability, and his social commentary on materialism and the need to return to traditional Western professional ethics and pure virtues was clearly disseminated in high school. Carraway must remain reliable, as a moral role model for Americans, as the embodiment of Western American identity, and able to resist the temptation to dive into the material wealth of the American dream. More importantly, Carraway's reliability is necessary to accept his description of Gatsby,

and therefore declare that the Dreamer is incorruptible. His reliability only reveals that the "new" American dream of material wealth is corrupt. In order to reveal Fitzgerald's comments on the rise of materialism in American society, Carraway must maintain a moral paradigm and be able to escape the social pressure of pursuing material wealth. An unreliable Carraway is no better than Daisy and Tom, completely immersed in their superficial wealth. Throughout the novel, people are defined by materialism, and their success depends entirely on their material accumulation. Gatsby is defined by his dirty house, luxurious parties, and his clothes. He believes that his extravagant possessions and lifestyle will attract Daisy. In addition to Gatsby, Daisy is defined materialistically as her voice is compared to "money" (Fitzgerald, 2008, p.96). Carraway completely separates himself from this materialism as he states, "I lived at West Egg, the-well, the less fashionable of the two, though this is a most superficial tag to express the bizarre and not a little sinister contrast between them" (Fitzgerald, 2008, p.8). It is evident that Carraway does not view himself as belonging to the world of luxury and finds the designation of West Egg as less "fashionable" to be extremely "superficial" and "bizarre."

In order to see Carraway outside of Eastern materialism, his description of that era must be regarded as truth. It is precisely because of his reliability that readers can believe that he has not been corrupted by materialism. Carraway's trip to the east participates in the "bond" business to accumulate material wealth and easily integrates himself into the rich life of the east and west. Ignore the eggs in the classroom, because these details will destroy Carraway's ability to be independent of his superficiality. Without Carraway's reliability, his ability to maintain a pure mind in the material world will be questioned, and perhaps the most important and relevant discussion will disappear: the birth of American consumerism and its impact on the material world we live in today. Development. In general, Carraway must remain reliable in order to criticize American materialism and truly have the ability to break away from it. His unreliability will lose "critical information" and individuals can keep their souls pure in the material world. Considering that Carraway's narrative is reliable, Daisy quickly becomes untrustworthy and depraved in the eyes of readers. Carraway characterizes Daisy as "insincere," and completely consumed in the material world impressed in Gatsby's house, parties, "gold toilet set," and "linen and silk shirts" (Fitzgerald, 2008, pp.73-74). Gatsby is described as taking her "under false pretenses", "ravenously and unscrupulously" (Fitzgerald, 2008, pp.118-119), and Daisy is further highlighted as corrupt and unworthy by losing her virginity before her marriage and possibly before her relationship with Gatsby. If the reader accepts Carraway's portrayal of Daisy, it will be found that Daisy is rotten and not worthy

as the incarnation of the American dream. In addition to being devalued and worthless, Daisy was fatal to Gatsby because she was related to Myrtle's death, so Fitzgerald evokes the fatal qualities of the materialistic American dream. If Carraway describes Daisy as an indifferent, careless woman throughout the novel, completely defined as a change in materialism, then Fitzgerald's exposure of the corrupt American dream would break. By treating Carraway as an unreliable person, Daisy becomes a flesh and blood person, a woman who is in a complicated situation with two men she loves, and is no longer the embodiment of a simple American dream. If Carraway's narration is not held to the end, Daisy becomes sincere in her statement, "I did love him once-but I loved you too" (Fitzgerald, 2008, p.105), and Daisy no longer simply represents materialism but a woman "who can't help the past," and is attempting to reconcile the two men she loves. Without Carraway being able to convince the reader of Daisy symbolically as the unworthy and corrupt version of the American dream.

5. CONCLUSION

By overemphasizing Carraway's reliability as a narrator, readers see Fitzgerald's social commentary on America and materialism as simplistic and one-sided. Fitzgerald's argument is not so simple. Carraway could not be trusted, and this led to a puzzling debate about Fitzgerald's intentions in writing such a novel and what he really

thought about the materialism that devoured the American dream. In a sense, the ambiguity of Carraway's narrative speaks to Fitzgerald's genius for the great American novel. If Fitzgerald's comments cannot be firmly adhered to through the reliable Carraway, the foundations of American identity are shaken to the core. Viewing Carraway as untrustworthy, American identity, its origins, and the foundations upon which the country was built become hazy, and corruption cannot be avoided, neither the East nor the West with no traditional virtues to fall back on to resolve the current condition of society. *The Great Gatsby* can only be reconciled with Carraway as a reliable narrator, showing America's youth what citizens can turn back to in order to regain the virtues, morality and work ethic of the past.

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