

# Discovering Nick: An Analysis of the Narrative Features in *The Great Gatsby*

WANG Yan

Zhoukou Normal University, Zhoukou, China

National University of Malaysia, Bangi Selangor, Malaysia

Fitzgerald tells the story in *The Great Gatsby* through the dramatized narrator, or the character in the play which helps this novel become a classic one. In this paper, the endeavor is to discover Nick Carraway both as a character and a narrator from the perspective of impersonal narration.

*Keywords:* Nick, narrator, narrative features

## Introduction

The Bulgarian narratologist, Tzvetan Todorov advocates a new poetics which will establish a general grammar of literature, the underlying rules governing literary practice. In his *Introduction to Poetics*, Todorov primarily focuses on narrative verbs and syntax, which are subdivided into three main aspects: “narrative time, voice and mood” (1981, p. 86). Narrative time involves condensation and expansion of the story time. Narrative voice is defined by Todorov as “the relationship between the narrator and the character in the story” (p. 87). There are three types of voice: Firstly, the narrator knows more than the character; secondly, the narrator knows only what the character knows; thirdly, the narrator knows less than the character knows. Narrative mood concerns the ways in which an episode can be presented. There are generally two narrative modes: showing and telling.

Nowadays, many novelists are unhappy about the omniscient narration that appears to limit the free will of the characters, and innovations in writing techniques have mostly sought the impersonality in narration, in which the characters appear to work out their own destinies without prompting from the author. This is known as impersonal narration. A case in point is American novelist Henry James who first advanced and studied the narrative point of view in writing. He advocates an observation of other characters and events through a central character or “centers of consciousness” (Booth, 1983, p. 153). This impersonal narration symbolizes the changes of narrative art from singular pattern to complex one. As W. C. Booth reviews in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*:

The most important unacknowledged narrators in modern fiction are “centers of consciousness” through whom authors have filtered their narratives. Whether such “reflectors,” as James sometimes called them, are highly polished mirrors reflecting complex mental experience, or the rather turbid, sense-bound “camera eyes” of much fiction since James, they fill precisely the function of vowed narrators—though they can add intensities of their own. (1983, p. 153)

In this paper, my main endeavor is to discover Nick Carraway both as a character and a narrator from the perspective of impersonal narration. In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick is a distant cousin of Daisy and a classmate of Tom's at Yale. Besides he lives next door to Gatsby at West Egg. With the progress of the story, the obscure relationships to be explored have been presented to the reader distinctly.

### **Fitzgerald's Impersonal Narration**

Fitzgerald's impersonal narration includes three narrative methods from Nick's point of view. The first way of narration is the narrative of the events Nick himself experiences, which is most frequently used in the novel. Nick acts as both a witness and participant in quite a lot of important events through the whole story.

However, Nick's narration is also limited due to his limited point of view. When Nick cannot supply us with the firsthand material or reference, the author uses the second way of narrating: the narrative of some remarks and rumors overheard by Nick. Concerning the origin of Gatsby, it remains an enigma for the most part of the story. So there are a lot of rumors about his origin and the means he accumulates wealth which is highlighted from the beginning of the story. Two girls and Jordan once lean together confidentially and pass on the following rumor:

From different rumors about Gatsby, Fitzgerald creates a kind of suspense and arouses great interest in the reader. It is clear that no guest in Gatsby's party is grateful to his invitation. They just enjoy themselves and even devalue their host by passing on rumors. In addition, sometimes Nick narrates in his own words:

...contemporary legends such as the underground pipe-line to Canada attached themselves to him, and there was one persistent story that he didn't live in a house at all, but in a boat that looked like a house and was moved secretly up and down the Long Island shore. (Fitzgerald, p. 98)

In order to counter the rumors of his origins, Nick Carraway offers something factual to the reader: "Gatsby's parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people—his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all" (p. 99). In the very next sequence, though, Nick shifts from the factual into adopting the mythic approach to Gatsby, in what is the most overt statement of Gatsby's status as a kind of God: "Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God" (p. 99). The sense of mystery and rumor surrounding Gatsby is indeed well preserved in the novel. We get to know something about the circumstances of his youth and birth through the second way of narration.

Fitzgerald's use of these methods is to make a compact and well-knit structure of the story through Nick's free procession of the information derived from many sources. Employing the impersonal narration has some obvious advantages. It is far more natural and credible for the character Nick to reveal his own thoughts than it is for the author to tell us. Another advantage worthy of mention is intimacy. In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick seems to address the reader directly and from the heart, sharing his personal observations and insights with an interested listener. With regard to the author, he stands outside the story and takes an unprejudiced attitude towards what the characters say and how they behave. This impersonal narrative technique can help the author achieve the aesthetic effect which the panoramic narration cannot amount to. The impersonal narration enables the reader to understand better Nick's innermost thoughts, and also makes possible objective and natural appraisals on Gatsby and other characters.

### Impersonality in *The Great Gatsby*

Impersonality or objectivity in the author can mean, first, an attitude of neutrality toward all values, an attempt at disinterested reporting of all things good and evil. In practice, however, no author ever manages to create a work that shows complete impersonality or impartiality. As W. C. Booth remarks:

...signs of the real author's untransformed loves and hates are almost always fatal, but clear recognition of objectivity in the author cannot lead us to doctrines about technique, and it should not lead us to demand of the author that he eliminates love and hate, and the judgments on which they are based, from his novels. (1983, p. 86)

This statement is best illustrated by Fitzgerald's distinctive impersonal narrating technique used in *The Great Gatsby*. His innovation embodies the following two aspects: Firstly, Nick's emotions intervene in the characters and their activities in the story; secondly, Nick's judgments also get involved in his narration.

*The Great Gatsby* not only concerns a tragic story of the doomed failure of the protagonist, but also depicts the process of Nick's moral perfection. Thus Nick feels obliged to interpose his emotions into the narrative in order to maintain moral justice in the realistic world. Coming from a very prominent family in the Middle Western city, he was born with "a sense of fundamental decencies". He wants "the world to be in a uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever". Though he boasts that he has a strong sense of tolerance, he has to admit that it has a limit. When he is encouraging the Easterners in different episodes and witnessing their moral decay, he feels very embarrassed and disgusted. As the story continues, he seems to take every opportunity to display his large "sense of fundamental decencies". The first incident in the book, his visit to the Buchanans, reveals much of this. He is obviously embarrassed to find Miss Jordan Barker stretched out full-length on a couch, having no inclination to assume a more formal position in the presence of a stranger. Then when he comes to understand that the person calling on the telephone is Tom's mistress and both Jordan and Daisy know this, he tells us his instinct was "to telephone immediately for the police". And as he drives away, he finds himself "confused" and "a little disgusted".

Secondly, Nick's judgments are interposed into his narration as well. The judgments appear at the very beginning of the story:

Nick's judgment—"Gatsby turned out all right at the end"—establishes the key tone to the narration of the whole story. To prevent the reader's bewilderment of emotions and keep the narrative not far from the keynote, it is an effective way to interweave judgments and assessment into the characters' activities. In fact, the narrator's comments shorten the distance between the author and the reader and also make their communication possible.

In the ending chapter, after the death of Gatsby, Nick remarks:

they were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together and let other people clean up the mess they had made... (Fitzgerald, 2008, pp. 180-181)

This judgment is a sharp contrast to his admiration for Gatsby. In spite of his faults and vulgarity, Gatsby is great, dignified, ennobled by his dream, which distinguishes him from the other disillusioned characters, who have lost the capacity to wonder and to dream. In this sense, Nick Carraway is far from being a disinterested observer of the action.

The intervention of Nick's judgments and emotions contributes a lot to the attainment of the ideal aesthetic distance in writing *The Great Gatsby*. On the one hand, being a character in the story, he is another protagonist who fails in his pursuit of American dream. He wants to get wealth and becomes wealthy by working hardy and honestly but learns that the people he associates with are hypocrites. There is a limit of his tolerance to work with such people and he has to pack his luggage and goes back home. On the other hand, being a narrator in the story, Nick is the persona, or the spokesman of the implied author. Nick unintentionally declares, "He is one of the few honest men". By doing so, he intends to show the reader that his narrative is objective; his judgments are reliable and accord with social moral ethics. Through the narrator, Fitzgerald retreats to the backstage, communicates with the reader confidentially, and helps to bring about the final acceptance and understanding of the protagonist by the reader.

### Conclusion

The novel is a tribute to Fitzgerald's art, especially his handling of impersonal narrative technique. It is Nick who alerts us to the dignity and depth of Gatsby's character, and suggests the relation of his tragedy to the American situation. Nick is not the central character of the novel, and he does not even properly belong to the novel's central conflict. But he is an important character, as well as the narrator, in that when we assess his character we are also assessing the validity of his perspective on the others.

Nearly every critic of *The Great Gatsby* has stressed the tremendous structural importance of the narrator, Nick Carraway, the character through whom Fitzgerald is able to achieve that aesthetic distance from his own experience is necessary for firmness of control and clarity of perception, through whom he can express that delicately poised ambiguity of moral vision, the sense of being "within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life" out of which insight into the truth of things must grow.

As we can see, Fitzgerald inherited some ideas from his predecessors and contemporaries with respect to the impersonal narration, but he is not chained to the impersonal tradition. In terms of his thoughts, the reader is liable to get confused about the moral values and judgments by a pure impersonal narrative mode in the story. Proper intervention of the implied author's emotions and assessments is both a new attempt and innovation in literary form. Fitzgerald makes a bold attempt in writing *The Great Gatsby*, in which he reveals his love and hatred indirectly. As a result, he succeeds in keeping the perfect artistic form intact; moreover, his novel has proved to be one of the most famous works in American literature around the 1920s.

### References

- Booth, W. C. (1983). *The rhetoric of fiction*. (Rev. ed.). Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.  
 Genette, G. (1980). *Narrative discourse*. (J. E. Lewin, Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.  
 Morner, K. (1991). *NTC's dictionary of literary terms*. Lincolnwood: National Textbook Co.  
 Todorov, T. (1969). *Grammaire du decameron*. The Hague: Mouton.  
 Todorov, T. (1981). *Introduction to poetics*. Brighton: Harvester.  
 Troy, W. (1945). Scott Fitzgerald—The authority of failure. *Accent*, 6, 56-60.