

THE ART OF NARRATION IN F SCOTT FITZGERALD'S

THE GREAT GATSBY

RAAD SABIR RAUF

Cihan University of Erbil, Arbil, Iraq

ABSTRACT

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is so rich of themes and writing techniques that give it an avant-garde status not only in the American fiction but also in the universal literature as well. This research paper is dedicated to trace the major highlights of the art and technique of narration in the novel.

The paper sheds light on the narration technique Fitzgerald uses in *The Great Gatsby*. It tackles three major aspects that contribute most to the theme of the failure of the American Dream of social success. The first aspect is the narrators of the story and their major or minor roles in the events. Whereas the second one is that of the cyclic journeys of both main characters: Gatsby and Nick Caraway. The third aspect, however, exposes some of Fitzgerald's artistry in using a novel language by creating certain expressions that increase the oddity and absurdity of Gatsby's character and status quo to add further flavor to the theme. All aspects are inseparable in our discussions and work together to the end of the story.

KEYWORDS: Narration, Scott Fitzgerald's

INTRODUCTION

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is by almost all the critics considered a masterpiece in the realm of American fiction. This consideration means both form and content in the sense that they both contribute to make an ideal piece of work in which Fitzgerald's efforts are apparent in improving the traditional narrative techniques used prior to his era as one of the pioneers in the modern art of narration. The present paper sheds light on Fitzgerald's artistry in innovating this distinct new technique of narration he uses in *The Great Gatsby* (Lehan, 1968. p. 8). By doing so to the form, he applies a magnetic charm to the content of the novel.

Fitzgerald's method of narration is that the story is narrated at several hands: Nick Caraway, Jordan Baker, Wolfsheim, Mr. Gatz, and Gatsby himself. The story is also told in two opposite directions: the one told by Nick goes clockwise in a chronological sequence as he witnesses the last events of a story that goes back to five years earlier. The other episodes that sometimes come fragmental are told by the rest of the narrators in a rather counterclockwise direction to tell the earlier phases of Gatsby-Daisy love story. The two lines of narration do not meet except a few pages before the end of the novel (Lehan, 1968. p. 17).

As a novel technique in the art of narration, we are prepared to follow two journeys: Gatsby's and that of Nick. The significance of this technique is to help differentiate between the two journeys, on the one hand; and to enable Nick to deliver the final moral demanded by the author. Our writer focuses on the deployment of his main narrator, Nick Caraway, in the first voice of "I" as an eye and ear witness, to make the necessary shift in his position as an author to apply objectivity and authenticity to the story (Sklar, 1967. p. 176).

THE ART OF NARRATION

In order to create an authentic and reliable narrator that the reader can believe, Fitzgerald delineates Nick's character in a way to stand for the human conscience of a public. He is reserved and guided by "interior rules" (Fitzgerald, 1959. p. 59), and "one of the few honest people" (Fitzgerald, 1959 p. 60), well-educated, etc. Then Fitzgerald provides Nick with so many facilities in order to give him a master key to have access to all the circumstances and situations in the story. Nick has the mobility factor to be present on spot and to witness incidents (Sklar, 1967. P. 177), besides having direct relation with both major and minor characters as no one else has. He is Daisy's far cousin; he used to be with Tom Buchanan during college time; the bungalow he hired is next to Gatsby's fabulous mansion; he first met Jordan at Daisy-Tom's mansion; he saw Mr. Gatz, Gatsby's father at Gatsby's funeral; and he met Wolfsheim after Gatsby's death. Besides, Nick is considered among the lost generation intelligentsia who got disillusioned in the aftermath of WWI and lost faith in the principles of the American Dream; that is why he was restless at his mid-western homestead and accordingly decides to move to the East to work in bond business.

Provided with all these facilities of nobility and mobility, Nick comes to be a qualified narrator of this novel. These facilities give him the mobility to move, the ability to see and observe the minute details of the surrounding atmosphere. His nobility and sincerity make him the confidant of the major characters. It is Nick's voice that we listen to as it conveys them to the reader. The time distance between the date of narration and the actual time in which the incidents take place (the summer of 1922) enables Nick to give his final judgment on the events at the beginning of the novel; thus, the novel begins from the end of the story. Nick tells Gatsby's tragedy, but at the same time, he admits his utter disillusionment at the end of the story. Hence, Nick's journey eastward and back can be considered as a journey of self-identification through Gatsby's experience. Gatsby then, does not develop except in the narrator's conscience and sympathy (Sklar, pp.173-6):

No-- Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dream that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men. (Fitzgerald. 1959. p.2)

Hence, after Gatsby's spiritual and moral defeat, he is saved, "turned out all right" from the anguish of disillusionment by his physical death, leaving that anguish for Nick to sense the futility of the American Dream which he describes in terms of "the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men." (Fitzgerald, 1957. P. 2).

Fitzgerald does not suffice Nick to be a mere narrator of the story as is the case with Emily Bronte's Nelly Dean in *The Wuthering Heights*; rather he is a major character and plays a significant role in the events. Moreover, if the story is Gatsby's fatal dream, the journey is that of Nick in the first place, and the moral is directed to him at the end of the story and through him, the moral is addressed to the readers after two years of concluding the journey. The one who learns the lesson and goes through Gatsby's ordeal is not Gatsby himself, but Nick. As for the lacking episodes that take place at earlier stages of Gatsby's life and romance with Daisy, they are delivered to Nick by the other afore said narrators (Chase, 1957. p. 44).

The novel is a cyclic journey of life, starting with Nick's movement from the Middle West eastward, to New York, then back to the Middle West. He gives his initiative reasons for this journey. He is a decent and reserved man from Minnesota, and he is thirty-two years old by the time of narration. "My family," says Nick, "have been prominent well-to-

do people in this Middle Western city for three generations. The Caraways are something of a clan, and we have tradition..." (Fitzgerald, 1959. p. 2). He graduated from the University of Yale (New Haven) and after participating in WWI, he came back "restless". The post-war restlessness deprives the new veteran from pre-romantic vision of his traditional hometown (Trilling, 1950. p. 245). Therefore, he sets off on his journey to the East it as the new "warm center of the world" in an attempt to find solace there as if he is in a quest for a holy grail. However, he eventually concludes in a self-realization that the East is no more than the wasteland of the New World.

All the major characters live in Long Island with lake Sound in the middle dividing it into East Egg and West Egg. Long Island is introduced as a potential place of extreme beauty that Nick's privileged location provides him an "eye sore" from which he gets "a view of the water, a partial view of my neighbor's [Gatsby's] loan, and the consoling proximity of millionaires" (Fitzgerald, 1959. p. 5). Yet Nick who by location belongs to West Egg, by tradition -- except for his limited mobility which money can provide-- he belongs to "staid nobility" of East Egg. In addition, he actually has some relatives there; a second cousin called Daisy with her husband Tom Buchanan whom he also knows since college days at Yale. (Fitzgerald, 1959. p. 5-6)

Relying on Nick's conscience, Fitzgerald prepares the reader to perceive the moral association of the characters to their environment before moving to Gatsby's romance with Daisy. The events do not start and end in Long Island, for it is not an entity by itself; it is only a beautiful town in New York. Yet amid the way between Long Island and New York, there is a valley of ashes, which is...

a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens, where the ashes take the form of houses and chimneys and rising smoke... and immediately the ash-gray men...stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight. (Fitzgerald, 1959. p. 23)

The very atmosphere that brings to mind T S Eliot's "The Waste Land with all the degenerated values embodied in both works (Eble, *F. Scott Fitzgerald*. 1963 p. 97).

Nick makes an indirectly significant comparison between the Buchanans and Gatsby by giving his impressions on the two separately. In appearance and reality work against each other, things that are explicit versus those delivered implicitly. Therefore, after his first visit to East Egg, Nick's impression of the Buchanans is that they represent the rich of America; their "Georgian colonial mansion" suggests the early days of the American revolution (1775-83), Tom's introduction as a "national figure" with his "cruel body" and "aggressive" features (Fitzgerald, 1959. pp. 6-7), his racism and snobbishness (Fitzgerald, 1959. p. 13). Then he turns to describe Daisy's deceptive eyes, "untrue" compliments (Fitzgerald, 1959. p. 15), her charming voice which the moment breaks off "ceasing to compel my attraction, my belief, I felt the basic insincerity of what she had said" (Fitzgerald, 1959. p. 18).

Daisy and Tom belong to the "secret society" distinguished as the upper class stratum that bounds Daisy to Tom-- all give this family its social and historical identity as one of the typical plutocratic families in America. Even their guest Jordan Baker, our second narrator, is far from being innocent. Nick's description of her is that she is "discontented", skeptic, contemptuous and eavesdropper; the notorious golf star with "a critical, unpleasant story" that Nick does not, but will soon, remember. This entire sickening atmosphere leaves a bad impression on Nick who says, "I was confused and a little disgusted as I drove away" (Fitzgerald, 1959. pp. 11-20). This impression becomes functional when Nick gives a diverse impression on Gatsby.

From the very beginning of the novel, Nick's impression on Gatsby is quite the opposite regarding the ambivalence between his appearance and reality. Here Nick expresses his sympathy with Gatsby despite the odds in his appearance:

Gatsby... represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn. If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life. (Fitzgerald, 1959. P. 2)

Here, Fitzgerald provides his narrator with the gift of a seer. Thus, Nick disapproves of Gatsby as far as the superficial "flabby impressionability" is concerned, but from the moral angle it is something of foresightedness that goes beyond the physical measures, Nick identifies himself with all that is responsive and gorgeous about Gatsby. The comparison is made between the beautiful classy atmosphere of the Buchanans with their shallow carelessness and ethical suspicion, with that of Gatsby's shallow appearance and ethical core for which the ideal American Dream stands. Now Nick is not a mere narrator, but through his impressions and remarks, Fitzgerald delivers his moral to the reader.

Likewise, Nick goes on to narrate the rest of the story through his journey guiding the reader with his impressions and judgments within the context of the chronological sequence of events. Also through Nick's voice, we come to hear the other narrators telling their part as eyewitnesses to the fragmental episodes of the early stages of the story. "One October day in nineteen-seventeen..." with this precise date starts Jordan telling Gatsby's romance with Daisy Fay to Nick in the Plaza Hotel. Jordan was seventeen years old then and two years than Daisy Fay, her rich neighbor's daughter who she admired. Anyways it was on that day when she saw Daisy sitting in her roadster with a lieutenant from Camp Taylor who she had never seen before. "The officer looked at Daisy... in a way that every young girl wants to be looked at sometime." The man called Jay Gatsby and she never saw him again for four years, even after she met him on Long Island, she did not realize it was the same man (Fitzgerald, 1959. pp. 75-6).

During the following two years, Jordan seldom met Daisy, but she heard some "wild rumors circulating about her-- how her mother had found her packing her bag one winter night to go to New York and say good-by to a soldier who was going overseas. She was effectually prevented, but she wasn't on speaking terms with her family for several weeks." It was after the armistice that she became a debutante and in June of 1919 she married "Tom Buchanan of Chicago" who made a fabulous wedding party. When Jordan entered Daisy's room as bridesmaid just before bridal dinner, she found the bride lying on her bed in her "flower dress-- and as drunk as a monkey. She had a bottle of Sauterne in one hand and a letter in the other." She asked Jordan to take all the precious presents back to Mr. Buchanan and, "Tell 'em all Daisy's change' her mind!" Ironically enough, on the next day, she was married to him and they went on a three-month tour to the South Seas (Fitzgerald, 1959. pp. 77-8).

Jordan goes on to tell the rest of Daisy-Tom's marital problems; how her happiness did not last long because of Tom's scandalous affairs with women. After having their daughter, the Buchanans went to France for a year, and then they settled in Chicago. However, again for Tom's new scandalous liaisons, they came at last to East Egg. When Daisy heard Gatsby's name uttered by Jordan six weeks ago, she immediately went to Jordan's room after Nick had left and both of the women became certain that this Jay Gatsby was Daisy's ex-lover (Fitzgerald, 1959. pp. 78-9). This is the story of Gatsby-Daisy-Tom, narrated from Jordan's angle due to her acquaintance and friendship with Daisy. Nick continues to tell the

story, this time through Gatsby himself who never speaks in the first person.

Gatsby was still in Camp Taylor when he met Daisy Fay. At first he found her "a nice girl," then came to consider her "extremely desirable." Moreover he was fascinated by the wealthy family she belonged to and the rich house she lived in. "It amazed him--he had never been in such a beautiful house before. But what gave it an air of breathless intensity was that Daisy lived there--it was as casual a thing to her as his tent out at camp was to him." He was excited, too, by the number of men that loved Daisy, for "it increased her value in his eyes" (Fitzgerald, 1959. p. 148). All these meretricious manifestations around Daisy allured him and captured all his dreams of social elation. This was because, then, Gatsby was a handsome lieutenant, but entirely poor and without a social background as Daisy's to support him so that if he had, for once, been stripped off his uniform, he would have been appeared next to her, almost nothing:

But he knew that he was in Daisy's house by colossal accident. However glorious might be his future of Jay Gatsby, he was at present a penniless young man without a past, and at any moment the invisible cloak of his uniform might slip from his shoulders... he took what he could get. (Fitzgerald, 1959. p. 149)

Under false pretensions, not that he was a millionaire, but by deliberately giving her a false "sense of security," by letting her believe that he was from much the same stratum as herself, Gatsby got from Daisy what he actually got. Nevertheless, Gatsby is betrayed by his misbelieve that he "felt married to her." (Fitzgerald, 1959. p. 149)

It is after Gatsby's death when Wolfsheim throws more light on this stage of Gatsby's life-journey. His angle reflects the immorality of the Jazz Age. Wolfsheim the gambler and gangster who "fixed the World Series back in 1919" (p. 74). Now we have the image of Gatsby, the already discharged American soldier. "My memory goes back to when first I met him," says Wolfsheim to Nick

A young major just out of the army and covered over the medals he got in the war. He was so hard up he had to keep wearing his uniform because he couldn't buy some regular clothes. First time I saw him was when he ... asked for a job. He hadn't eat anything for a couple of days.... He ate more than four dollars' worth of food in half an hour. (Fitzgerald, 1959. p. 172)

Like the language Fitzgerald uses in describing Gatsby and the valley of ashes, the art of narration also goes to Fitzgerald's artistry in creating absurd situations and grotesque scenes using some paradoxical expressions and images to make the reader feel the absurdity of the American Dream. This passage is important in two measures: first, it extends the image of the military uniform as a disguise "cloak". Here it becomes quite evident why Gatsby could not return soon despite Daisy's desperate letters; for he would disclose his reality that he could not even afford to buy some proper civvies; the second is that Fitzgerald ironically juxtaposes honor "covered over the medals" to hunger with which he satirizes the American Dream.

A veteran still wearing "major", covered over badges of honor and pride, starving and cannot afford buying civvies is disillusioned by the promises which he nurtured, no wonder to eventually wind up at Wolfsheim's dirty hands to take him to his underworld business. "Did you start him in business?" Nick inquires. "Start him!" says Wolfsheim surprised, "I made him... I raised him out of nothing, right out of the gutter." This image of an American young veteran being saved out of the gutter to be compared to Gatsby's childhood image of a promising youngster nourished on Ben

Franklin's principles of *Poor Richard's Almanac* as states his father (Chase, 1957. p. 167). Mr. Gatz, our other narrator, appears only on the funeral day just to show how good Gatsby was.

Gatsby was born in North Dakota, or somewhere in the Middle West, of a poor family who "were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people." His real, or at least legal, name is James Gatz, which he has changed into Jay Gatsby at the age of seventeen. The schedule on the flyleaf of a book called *Hopalong Cassidy*, which the father shows to Nick reads:

| | |
|--|----------------------|
| Rise from bed | 6:00 A.M. |
| Dumbbell exercise and wall scaling | 6:15-6:30 A. M. |
| Study electricity, etc. | 7:15-8:15 A. M. |
| Work | 8:30 A.M.- 6:30 P.M. |

And so on down to

Study needed inventions7:00- 9:00 P. M.

(Fitzgerald, 1959. pp. 98-9)

These together with general resolves show Gatsby's self-discipline and the quality of personal hope to elevate his mental and physical faculties besides diligence and hard work to meet the promises of the American Dream of social elation.

However, it is evident from his father's admiring speech that Gatsby had realized earlier that his Mid-Western town had been too limited to endow him his incessantly increasing demand of social success: "of course we was broke up when he run off from home," says Mr. Gatz, "but I see now there was a reason for it. He knew he had a big future in front of him. And ever since he made a success he was very generous with me" (p. 174).

CONCLUSIONS

F. Scott Fitzgerald's contribution to the art of narration in the *The Great Gatsby* lies in his deployment of a series of narrators in order to apply the sense of objectivity and authenticity to the story. This technique was novel in the history of the American novel at the time. The artistry also goes to another novel technique in using time and seasonal manifestations to apply cyclic journeys of both Gatsby and Nick. As the former's end in absurdity, the latter's journey winds up in sorrow.

Nick is not a first person live witness to the events only; he is made to deliver his feelings and personal judgments to the reader as well. The reader on his part cannot but sympathize with Nick who, in turn, is made to sympathize with Gatsby. Except for Gatsby, the other narrators also speak in the first person as eyewitnesses but their episodes are delivered to the reader via Nick Caraway.

The art and techniques manipulated by Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* are among pivot fields of literary criticism and need further study and consideration by literary scholars.

REFERENCES

1. Allen, Fredrick Lewis. *The Big Change: America Transforms Itself 1900-1950*. New York: Harper and Brothers Publisher, 1952.
2. ----- . *Only Yesterday: n Informal History of the Nineteenth- Twenties*. New York: Bantam Books, 1952.
3. Allen, Walter. *Tradition and Dream*. London: The Hogarth Press, 1986.
4. Chase, Richard. *The American Novel and Its Tradition*. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957.
5. Cowley, Malcolm. *Exile's Return*. New York: The Viking Press, 1962.
6. ----- . "Introduction to the Great Gatsby", F. Scott Fitzgerald: Three Novels: The Great Gatsby, Tender is the Night, The Last Tycoon. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953.
7. Eble, Kenneth. *F. Scott Fitzgerald*. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1963.
8. ----- . (ed.). *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A collection of Criticism*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973.
9. ----- . (ed.). "The Craft of Revision: The Great Gatsby", *American Literature*. Vol. 36 (November, 1964).
10. Fiedler, Leslie A. *Waiting for the End*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964.
11. ----- Love and Death in The American Novel. New York: Criterion Books, 1960.
12. F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953.
13. Hoffman, Fredrick J. *The Great Gatsby: A Study*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962.
14. Kazin, Alfred (ed.). *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Man and his Work*. New York: Collier Books, 1966.
15. Lehan, Richard D. *F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Craft of Fiction*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968.
16. Sklar, Robert. *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Last Laocoon*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1967.
17. Trilling, Lionel. *The Liberal Imagination*. Carden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1950

