

In an epigraph to the book, Malgonkar quotes verse 27 of "The Path of Knowledge" from the *Bhagavad Gita*: "Desire and Aversion are opposite shadows. Those who allow themselves to be overcome by their struggle cannot rise to a knowledge of reality." The author gives his treatment of the theme of interracial relations substance and reality by working concretely in terms of the human passions of desire and aversion. His Englishmen and Anglo-Indians are living human beings and their association and estrangement are a natural result of their mutual likes and dislikes. Few writers have shown Malgonkar's artistic integrity in dealing with the theme of interracial and intercultural relations.

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Nick Carraway as Narrator in *The Great Gatsby*

Critics interested in the role of Nick Carraway as narrator in *The Great Gatsby* may be divided into two rather broad groups. The majority position is the traditional one: Nick is considered quite reliable, basically honest, and ultimately changed by his contact with Gatsby.¹ A variation of this interpretation has Carraway stumbling to his conclusion, thereby accounting for a number of discrepancies in his narration; in short, Nick progresses from innocence to experience before finally locating a moral vision.² Against this position may be found a small number of critics who hold that Nick is quite unreliable: a sentimentalist at least, and possibly dishonest and immoral.³ Hence, *The Great Gatsby* is either a deceptively tricky novel, or one that is artistically flawed in both character and structure. Both camps seem to agree on one point: the character of Gatsby remains static throughout the book; at the end he is still waiting for Daisy's telephone call, clutching, as it were, to his quixotic dream. The critical controversy merits a brief return to the text as our final understanding of Gatsby is almost entirely dependent upon the reliability of Carraway's narration.

To begin with, Nick is not very intelligent. He draws attention to this fact by stating that Jordan Baker avoids "clever, shrewd men," and then admits to being "slow-thinking" himself.⁴ Secondly, it is generally accepted that Nick has

¹This position was given added weight by Robert Emmet Long's distinguished article, "The Great Gatsby and the Tradition of Joseph Conrad," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 8 (Summer 1966—Fall 1966), Part I: 257-76, Part II: 407-22. Long, however, tends to identify Nick too closely with the character of Marlowe, as though at points Carraway were no more than a carbon copy of Conrad's creation.

²See, for example, Jerome Thale, "The Narrator As Hero," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 3, No. 2 (July 1957), 70, and J. S. Westbrook, "Nature and Optics in *The Great Gatsby*," *American Literature*, 32 (March 1960), pp. 78-84.

³I would refer the reader to the following articles, rather than expressing my agreements and disagreements with critics from this group in a series of footnotes: R. W. Stallman, "Gatsby and the Hole in Time," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 1 (Nov. 1955), 2-16; Gary J. Scrimgeour, "Against *The Great Gatsby*," *Criticism*, 8 (Winter 1966), 75-86; Richard Foster, "The Way to Read *Gatsby*," in *Sense and Sensibility in Twentieth-Century Writing: A Gathering in Memory of William Van O'Connor*, ed. Brom Weber (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 94-108.

⁴F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), p. 39. Future references to this edition will be noted parenthetically within the text.

at least a minor problem with honesty. He lies to himself, and consequently the reader, about his relationship with a girl back home; he is challenged by Jordan, "I thought you were rather an honest, straightforward person" (p. 120); and, after Gatsby's death, he praises Catherine's character for lying to a judge. It would be incorrect to call Carraway a compulsive liar, but a mistake not to be wary of any further inconsistencies. In addition, it might be noticed that, while Nick has his two Midwestern feet firmly on the ground, his mind is not totally averse to a little sentimentality. Gatsby becomes his romantic hero by the end of the 1922 summer and is portrayed as such, sometimes to an embarrassing extent, throughout the course of Nick's memoir. Lines such as, "Gatsby, who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn" (p. 1), are ultimately quite humorous in view of Carraway's beside-himself tendency to cheerlead. This is most obvious in the Plaza Hotel room confrontation between Tom and Gatsby; Nick says of his hero, "I wanted to get up and slap him on the back. I had one of those renewals of complete faith in him that I'd experienced before" (p. 86).

It would be naive to expect a slow-thinking, sentimental, and occasionally dishonest narrator to be totally reliable. When an element of distortion is added, the challenge of perception becomes prodigious. Carraway is particularly susceptible to alcohol in *The Great Gatsby*. On the afternoon of Myrtle's party, he states, "I sat down discreetly in the living-room and read a chapter of *Simon Called Peter*—either it was terrible stuff or the whiskey distorted things, because it didn't make any sense to me" (p. 19). A couple of weeks later at Gatsby's party, he notes, "I had taken two finger-bowls of champagne, and the scene had changed before my eyes into something significant, elemental, and profound" (p. 31). But whiskey and champagne are not the only agents of distortion in *The Great Gatsby*. The East, in particular the two Eggs, is an "enchanted wood,"⁵ a "magical country"⁶; indeed, it has the authenticity of Universal Studios. The houses tend to be re-creations and the people actors and actresses playing either self-conceived, as in the case of Gatsby, or socially-determined roles. In addition, Gatsby is a producer, a "regular Belasco" (p. 30), and perhaps refiguration of Monroe Stahr. He attempts to re-create the past by conjuring what he imagines to be Louisville-type parties on the lot of his property. Curiously, Daisy finds even these too realistic, preferring the twice-removed gestures of "the moving-picture director and his Star" (p. 71).

For all these obstacles, the reliability of Nick's narration is quite surprising. His "slow-thinking" is channeled into caution, his dishonesty is rare and ultimately acknowledged, and his break with Jordan signals an astute, if slow to crystallize, moral sense. He has never had much difficulty seeing through the artifices of the East, perhaps because Tom and Daisy are such splendid examples of its opulence. His tendency to an almost cinematic sentimentality is, however, never quite held in check; this leads to a misrepresentation of one of the most crucial scenes in the novel:

If that was true he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass. A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about . . . like that ashen, fantastic figure gliding toward him through the amorphous trees. (p. 108)

⁵Long, p. 416.

⁶Westbrook, p. 79.

The description is melodramatic; that Gatsby would actually find leaves “frightening” and a rose “grotesque” is unlikely. In fact, Nick’s projection of what his hero “must have felt” before death does not at all correspond to Gatsby’s movements of the day. For a man who has been broken by a dream, Gatsby has had a good breakfast with Nick, puts on his bathing suit at two o’clock, and goes to his garage for a pneumatic mattress. He uses the pool for the first time all summer, a summer which has been marked by his obsession with an illusory dream. If anything, this suggests adjustment and redirection—the pool, a baptism to life. Referring to Daisy’s telephone call, Nick states, “I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn’t believe it would come, and perhaps he no longer cared” (p. 108). The fact that Nick himself had earlier in the afternoon tried to get Gatsby on the phone four times—only to discover that the line was being “kept open for long distance from Detroit” (p. 104)—subtracts from the profundity of this observation. By afternoon, Gatsby was in no way expecting to hear from Daisy.

The character of Gatsby does not remain “static” throughout the course of the summer’s events; it is only Nick’s conception of him that does. This is evident in the symbolic portrayal of Gatsby’s own house. It is first described as “a factual imitation of some Hotel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side” (p. 4); in short, it is a palace, a castle out of a fairy tale. A couple of days before Gatsby’s reunion with Daisy, the mansion is “blazing” the peninsula with light; Gatsby is outside, “glancing into some of the rooms” (p. 54), savoring his dream at its peak. But, after his contact with Daisy, the “enchantment” of the house begins to dissipate. Before a couple of weeks have passed, the mansion has lost its imaginative quality altogether, reflecting instead Gatsby’s actual state: secretive and criminal. After Gatsby’s ridiculous vigil before the altar of Daisy, after she has kept him waiting until four o’clock in the morning before turning out the light, Gatsby returns to his house to do a mental inventory with Nick. Carraway first observes, “There was an inexplicable amount of dust everywhere, and the rooms were musty, as though they hadn’t been aired for many days” (p. 98). They throw open the French windows of the drawing room, and Gatsby tells the true story of his past, relating the history of his love for Daisy. Nick notes, “It was dawn now on Long Island and we went about opening the rest of the windows downstairs, filling the house with grey-turning, gold-turning light” (p. 101). The vacuity of his dream slowly “dawns” upon Gatsby; by noon, he has dismissed any last straws of hope and has once again begun to take charge of his life.

As narrator, Nick is in the tradition of *Bartleby’s* employer: a good enough fellow, prudent, slightly obtuse but, nevertheless, willing to help if he can. As *Bartleby* remains an enigma for his employer, so the East remains for Carraway “distorted beyond my eyes’ power of correction” (p. 118). The employer is blinded by the categories of the rational mind, whereas Carraway is distracted by an aptitude for sentimentality. Fortunately, Nick does not walk away completely empty-handed, and this is why the “Marlowe method” works so well. Nick’s rejection of Jordan (and all that she represents) is surely a healthy sign, and one that cannot be dismissed as easily as a number of commentators have attempted.⁷ Still, Carraway ultimately misses the moral of his summer with Gatsby: one can neither go back in time, nor succeed in re-creating the past. Nick’s return to the Midwest is not only a geographical retreat, but an attempted escape into an idyllic past. The sentimentality of his reminiscences stops just short of making

⁷Scrimgeour, for example, concludes that Carraway is a “moral eunuch,” p. 83, adding “He has learned nothing,” p. 84. Although I am in strong sympathy with much of Scrimgeour’s article, irony is ultimately mistaken for incompetence: the consequence of a critic allowing an author’s life to influence his reading of that author’s work, still a common phenomenon in Fitzgerald criticism.

angels in the snow: "That's my Middle West—not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns, but the thrilling returning trains of my youth, and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow" (p. 118). Nick's attempt at re-creating the past—the memoir of the summer of 1922—is likewise doomed to failure. In detective-like fashion, he doggedly puts the pieces together, but finally succeeds in resurrecting only a shell of the events. In both his life and memoir, Nick glosses over Gatsby's final alternative to retreat—to make a stand, and adjust—suggesting a not very optimistic future ahead. So Nick beats on, boat against the current, being "borne back ceaselessly into the past."

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