

Fourth Grade / Novel

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The great Gatsby (F. Scott Fitzgerald)

Lecture 11 /

Characters

NICK CARRAWAY

Nick Carraway, the story's narrator, has a singular place within *The Great Gatsby*. First, he is both narrator and participant. Part of Fitzgerald's skill in *The Great Gatsby* shines through the way he cleverly makes Nick a focal point of the action, while simultaneously allowing him to remain sufficiently in the background. In addition, Nick has the distinct honor of being the only character who changes substantially from the story's beginning to its end. Nick, although he initially seems outside the action, slowly moves to the forefront, becoming an important vehicle for the novel's messages.

On one level, Nick is Fitzgerald's Everyman, yet in many ways he is much more. He comes from a fairly nondescript background. He hails from the upper Midwest (Minnesota or Wisconsin) and has supposedly been raised on stereotypical Midwestern values (hard work, perseverance, justice, and so on). He is a little more complex than that, however. His family, although descended from the "Dukes of Buccleuch," really started when Nick's grandfather's brother came to the U.S. in 1851. By the time the story takes place, the Carraways have only been in this country for a little over seventy years — not long, in the great scope of things. In addition, the family patriarch didn't exhibit the good Midwestern values Nick sees in himself. When the civil war began, Nick's relative "sent a

substitute" to fight for him, while he started the family business. This little detail divulges a few things: It places the Carraways in a particular class (because only the wealthy could afford to send a substitute to fight) and suggests that the early Carraways were more tied to commerce than justice. Nick's relative apparently doesn't have any qualms about sending a poorer man off to be killed in his stead. Given this background, it is interesting that Nick would come to be regarded as a level-headed and caring man, enough of a dreamer to set goals, but practical enough to know when to abandon his dreams.

Also contributing to Nick's characterization as an Everyman are his goals in life. He heads East after World War I, seeking largely to escape the monotony he perceives to permeate the Midwest and to make his fortune. He is an educated man who desires more out of life than the quiet Midwest can deliver (although it is interesting that before living in the city any length of time he retreats to the country). What helps make Nick so remarkable, however, is the way that he has aspirations without being taken in — to move with the socialites, for example, but not allowing himself to become blinded by the glitz that characterizes their lifestyle. When he realizes what his social superiors are really like (shallow, hollow, uncaring, and self-serving), he is disgusted and, rather than continuing to cater to them, he distances himself. In effect, motivated by his conscience, Nick commits social suicide by forcefully pulling away from people like the Buchanans and Jordan Baker.

In addition to his Everyman quality, Nick's moral sense helps to set him apart from all the other characters. From the first time he interacts with others (Daisy, Tom, and Jordan in Chapter 1), he clearly isn't like them. He is set off as being more practical and down-to-earth than other characters. This essence is again brought to life in Chapter 2 when he doesn't

quite know how to respond to being introduced into Tom and Myrtle's secret world (notice, however, that he doesn't feel the need to tell anyone about his adventures).

In Chapter 3, again Nick comes off as less mercenary than everyone else in the book as he waits for an invitation to attend one of Gatsby's parties, and then when he does, he takes the time to seek out his host. From these instances (and others like them spread throughout the book) it becomes clear that Nick, in many ways, is an outsider.

Nick has what many of the other characters lack — personal integrity — and his sense of right and wrong helps to elevate him above the others. He alone is repulsed by the phony nature of the socialites. He alone is moved by Gatsby's death. When the other characters scatter to the wind after Gatsby's death, Nick, unable to believe that none of Gatsby's associates will even pay their last respects, picks up the pieces and ensures Gatsby isn't alone in his death. Through the course of *The Great Gatsby* Nick grows, from a man dreaming of a fortune, to a man who knows only too well what misery a fortune can bring.

JAY GATSBY

Gatsby comes from the Midwest (North Dakota, although his father later comes from Minnesota). Early in the book, he is established as a dreamer who is charming, gracious, and a bit mysterious. As the story unfolds, however, the reader learns more and more what precipitates the mystery: that everything he has done in his adult life has been with the sole purpose of fulfilling the most unrealistic of dreams — to recapture the past. Gatsby is in many ways, as the title suggests, *great*, but when looking at him critically, some of the things he stands for may not be so admirable.

In one sense, Gatsby's rags-to-riches success story makes him an embodiment of the American dream. He started life with little, as the son of fairly unsuccessful farmers. By the time he was a young man he had even less, having voluntarily estranged himself from his family, unable to come to terms with the lot he had been dealt in life. While on his own, he had the opportunity to reinvent himself, and due solely to his own ingenuity, Jimmy Gatz evolved into Jay Gatsby. As such, life became much different (although he was missing one key ingredient: money). He was no longer tied to his early years, but could imagine whatever past for himself he desired. And then he fell in love, a fateful incident that would change the course of his life forever. After meeting Daisy, everything he did was for the singular purpose of winning her. Money was, essentially, the issue that prevented their being together, and so Gatsby made sure he would never again be without it. Gatsby's drive and perseverance in obtaining his goal is, in many senses, commendable. He is a self-made man (in all respects) and as such, is admirable.

However, all positive traits aside, there are aspects of Jay Gatsby that call into question that admiration. Gatsby's money did not come from inheritance, as he would like people to believe, but from organized crime. The story takes place during the time of prohibition and Gatsby has profited greatly from selling liquor illegally. In addition, while people come to Gatsby's parties in droves, he really knows very little about them. In fact, he doesn't *want* to know much about them, just whether they know Daisy. Finally, Gatsby's friendship with Nick really begins to blossom only after he finds out that Nick is Daisy's cousin.

In assessing Gatsby, one must examine his blind pursuit of Daisy. Everything he does, every purchase he makes, every party he throws, is all part of his grand scheme to bring Daisy back into his life for good. In one sense, this is a lovely

romantic gesture, but in another sense, it perpetuates a childish illusion. By being so focused on his dream of Daisy, Gatsby moves further and further into a fantasy world. His inability to deal with reality sets him outside the norm and, eventually, his holding on to the dream leads to his death. By the end of Chapter 7, Gatsby is standing guard outside of Daisy's house on a needless vigil. He is completely unable to realize that his dream is not a reality and so stands watching for a sign from Daisy. He sees what he is doing as noble, honorable, and purposeful. The reader, however, sees the futility of his task as he becomes a parody of his former self. Gatsby is, quite literally, fatally idealistic. He can't wait to distance himself from his past in terms of his family, but yet he lives his adult life trying to recapture the past he had with Daisy. What makes matters worse, too, is that he is in love with the *idea* of Daisy, not Daisy as she herself is.