

Dept. of English

4th Year Novel

Assist. Prof Dr. Marwan Kadhim Mohammed

First-person perspective in *The Great Gatsby*

The Great Gatsby is written in first-person limited perspective from Nick's point of view. This means that Nick uses the word "I" and describes events as he experienced them. He does not know what other characters are thinking unless they tell him. Although Nick narrates the book, in many ways he is incidental to the events involved, except that he facilitates the meeting of Daisy and Gatsby. For the most part, he remains an observer of the events around him, disappearing into the background when it comes time to narrate crucial meetings between Gatsby, Tom, and Daisy. In several extended passages his voice disappears completely, and he relates thoughts and feelings of other characters as though he is inside their heads. When Gatsby tells Nick about his past with Daisy, Nick writes directly from Gatsby's point of view "His heart beat faster as Daisy's white face came up to his own. He knew that when he kissed this girl... his mind would never romp again like the mind of God. So he waited..." These passages are presented as recollections Gatsby

has told Nick, so they don't violate the first-person narration.

Whenever a novel is narrated in the first person by one of the characters, a key question for the reader is how much faith we should put in the narrator's reliability. When a story is told from one person's perspective, the narrator will almost always be unreliable in some way, simply because the narrator brings his or her own biases to bear on the situation. Some narrators deliberately lie to the reader. We call these narrators, or any narrator whose words can largely not be trusted, "unreliable narrators." Nick Carraway is not a classically unreliable narrator, because Fitzgerald gives no indications that Nick is lying to the reader or that his version of events directly contradicts anyone else's. He apparently tries to be as truthful as possible. He tells us right away that he has an uncanny ability to reserve judgment and get people to trust him, which encourages us to see him as a reliable narrator. At the same time, he also says "I am one of the few honest people I have ever known." His very need to describe himself this way makes the reader question how much Nick can actually be trusted.

Nick is also unreliable because of his fondness for Gatsby, which affects his view of the story and is contrasted by his clear distaste for the other characters in the book. He sees Gatsby as a symbol of hope, which

makes his perspective biased and occasionally makes us question his representation of Gatsby or Daisy as characters. Nick's bias becomes clear in the earliest pages of the book, when he tells us that "there was something gorgeous about him [Gatsby], some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life." We are inclined to see Gatsby as a sensitive genius and to side with him in the romantic triangle between Gatsby, Daisy, and Tom. The less appealing aspects of Gatsby's character – the fact that he is involved in adultery, or that his wealth comes from unsavory sources, and he may be mixed up in organized crime – are justified as the romantic lengths to which he'll go to be reunited with Daisy. Nick feels contempt for Tom, and, to a lesser degree, Daisy, and his personal feelings for the characters similarly color his presentation of events.