The Struggle to be Honest in a Corrupt World: Narration and Relations in The Great Gatsby

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Abstract

Although many attempts have been made on determining the trustworthiness of the narrator in *The Great Gatsby*, I would like to argue that there is more to say on that matter. Critics like Gary Scrimgeour and Colin Cass claim that the narrator Nick Carraway is hypocrisy embodied. They argue that his statements do not coincide with his actions, and that the author Fitzgerald was clumsy and made Nick a hypocrite by mistake. On the contrary, I would like to argue that Fitzgerald very much knew what he was doing when he portrayed the character of Nick. In Nick, Fitzgerald succeeds to depict a person with human faults but his heart in the right place, who struggles to be honest in a corrupt world. His hypocrisy in the narrative should rather be viewed as turning points in his moral growth, as he seeks to understand the new ways of the west. By investigating Nick’s different relationships in the novel and analysing them one by one, I collect proof to strengthen my claim. Beginning with the smaller characters of Daisy, Tom, and Jordan, I then continue to analyse Gatsby and finally the relationship between Nick and the reader. One of my main points in this essay is that the paths of Nick and Gatsby are closely linked and that Nick shadows much of what Gatsby does. Therefore Nick’s statement about Gatsby, “[Gatsby] believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself” (53) is essential in understanding Nick’s actions. Nick thinks he was given the promise of the impossible and therefore took a leap at life, although everything he had ever known was against it. When Nick eventually realizes that Gatsby’s dream would fail, he still shows tribute to the man whom this narrative is ultimately written for, so the sacrifice for the dead Gatsby must be seen as an action of an honest man.

**Keywords:** Narration, honesty, dishonesty, reliability, morality, moral journey, ambivalence, moral growth
I never blame failure - there are too many complicated situations in life - but I am absolutely merciless toward lack of effort.

- F. Scott Fitzgerald

Introduction

The first person narrative is an effective device when telling a story from one person’s, i.e. the protagonist’s, point of view. Through the protagonist's focalization, we are not only introduced to the identity of the narrator, but we also get to share his or her opinions about the surrounding characters and environment. Events, feelings, and relations are also elements that we are introduced to from this person’s perspective. In addition, there is always the possibility of feeling empathy for the narrator. Furthermore, with a first person narrative there is also the question of the reliability of the narrator. The narrators’ subjective voice practically forces the reader to agree with what is being told. Why would the narrator lie? What is there to gain other than the support of the readers? However, when this notion is investigated further, one could ask if there really is such a thing as a reliable narrator? The first person narrative can be understood as a reflection of the narrator's own subjective truth, even if the narrator tries to convince the readers of something or just has recalled the story wrong from memory. Ultimately, it is up to the readers to judge whether the narrator is to be seen as reliable or not.

One narrator that has been called to the stand on many occasions is Nick Carraway in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Nick is not only the narrator but he is also a character in the novel, i.e. a homodiegetic narrator (Zipfel 122). Many critics have argued that he is a hypocritical and a dishonest character and the reader should reconsider twice before taking his words for granted. Nevertheless there is
proof in the work of Fitzgerald that suggests otherwise, that Nick is perhaps not flawless but at least he tries to be an honest and dutiful person. Nick’s famous line “I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known” (65), undoubtedly claims that Nick desires the reader to believe in his honesty, which ultimately leaves it for the reader to decide whether Nick is to be trusted or not.

In this essay, I will argue that Nick Carraway is in general an honest character, loyal to the people he holds dear. I will focus on the relationships Nick has in *The Great Gatsby* and identify issues of control, his moral involvements, his ambivalence towards the reader and the other characters and his moral and ethical journey. By considering these notions, I will show in what respects Fitzgerald’s Nick can be considered perhaps neither honest nor dishonest, but as a realistic character with good intentions. Therefore, the notion of his ambivalence is very important. The significance of investigating Nick’s true character is to show that Fitzgerald indeed portrayed a very human narrator in *The Great Gatsby*, with both good sides and bad sides, whose honesty is not a sham but a moral attempt in a corrupt world.

**Review of Literature**

Nick’s reliability and morality have been written on in abundance and one could ask why one would bother to stretch this notion any further? The point is that critics over the years almost exclusively have focused on Nick Carraway’s narration as being either one or the other side of the coin. It seems that only a few people regard Fitzgerald’s portrayal of Nick as person with traits that go beyond the black and the white, and surround him with a realistic aura, as the ones of an actual person. Most claims of Nick’s dishonesty as a character build on arguments made out of placing Nick’s ambiguous actions in contrast to each other, i.e. making Nick a hypocrite. Thomas Boyle states that rather than “providing ‘thoroughly reliable guidance,’ the narrator is shallow, confused, hypocritical, and immoral” (Boyle 22). He points this out by mentioning that Nick on several occasions in the book acts ambivalently: “Although [Nick] boasts of his tolerance, he thinks, after seeing the limousine ‘driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl ... anything can happen now... anything at all’”. Boyle continues to elaborate; “[t]his instance is but one of many in which Nick himself displays the very qualities he finds reprehensible in others” (Boyle 22). A critic that carries this notion further is Gary
Scrimgeour in his article “Against The Great Gatsby”. Scrimgeour indeed suggests that Nick “pretend[s] to open-mindedness, modesty, and honesty” (76), but that he does not accomplish what he is aspiring for. However, Scrimgeour does not seem to believe that the fault is entirely Nick’s, and addresses further criticism to the author Fitzgerald, for being bad at his job. He states, “I believe that Fitzgerald, never a great critical theorist, did not realize the dual nature of his narrator and therefore handled him very clumsily—and very revealingly” (76). Because of this Scrimgeour ultimately concludes: “Carraway's failure is Fitzgerald's failure” (86). Here, it is also worth mentioning that Scrimgeour tries to distance himself and his readers from Nick in his article, by referring to Nick only with his last name, Carraway. Scrimgeour’s method creates a gap that makes it harder for the readers to identify themselves with Nick. But like most of the other articles, I will also address Nick by his first name, not foremost in an attempt gain support, but because it is the conventional way of doing it. Caten Town makes a final note on the account of Nick’s dishonesty, and claims that his narration “fails, not for lack of trying but for the limitations inherent in his language” (Town 805). Rather than telling us the actual story, Town suggests that “Nick believes in [the word’s] power authentically to embody emotion in metaphor and in his power therefore to be true to his story” (805). Nick is a writer and imbedded in his language are artistic features that limit his attempts to be straightforward. Nevertheless, Nick shows no purpose of intentionally deluding the reader other than with valuable lessons of life.

On the other side of the coin, we find critics such as Thomas Hanzo who suggests that Nick’s honesty is a proof of the “puritan morality of the west” (69). In addition, Charles Samuels elaborates more on Nick’s narration and honesty saying “Then there is Nick, who is more than just a clever manipulation of point of view [...] he has, at least, seen life and glory. And that, surely, is no small achievement, for he has made us see it too” (794). However, I would suggest that Nick’s narration brings more than just a “clever manipulation of point of view”. Nevertheless, what both Samuels and Hanzo achieve to do, is to bring light on Nick’s moral journey throughout the novel. Hanzo states that Nick, and not Gatsby, “is the moral centre of the book” (62) and Samuels suggests that Nick’s breakup with Jordan is “the measure of Nick's growth” (792). To understand the importance of Nick’s growth as a character is essential in order to recognize why Nick is ambivalent in his actions and also in his narration. James Mellard is another critic who expresses a similar
conclusion: “Fitzgerald places character against character, setting against setting, and
one plot against another to demonstrate for the reader the moral change and ethical
growth of his narrator, Nick” (853). Although Mellard focuses on counterpoint as
technique in *The Great Gatsby*, he validates a good point within our narrator, Nick’s
growth.

Finally, there have been critics who look on both sides of the coin and
combine that mass into a whole and this is where I also take a stand. Colin Cass
argues that:

Fitzgerald, who once said of himself, “... I guess I am too much a
moralist at heart, and really want to preach at people in some
acceptable form . . .”, needs to protect his narrator's moral position.
That is not to say that Nick must be perfect. His success depends,
indeed, on his seeming a believable human with normal faults.
(123)

I must agree with this statement. However Cass, similar to Scrimgeour, believes that
much of Nick’s ambivalence and questionable honesty “was a result of his first-
person narrative [that] created a technical problem [Fitzgerald] could not plot his way
out of” (121). Furthermore, he supposes that “Fitzgerald's attempts to establish the
reliability of his narrator [was a] technical necessity […] in order to conceal
unavoidable implausibility: and the transparent difficulties he had with his plot and
narrative convention have been examined” (Cass 122). Conversely, rather than
blaming Fitzgerald for being a bad writer who has painted himself into a corner, I
want to argue that Fitzgerald, by making “a believable human with normal faults,”
accomplishes something more, something believable and realistic.

In order to unravel the true nature of Nick I have chosen to investigate his
different relationships in the novel thoroughly. The aim is to see what his narration
and actions towards the other characters convey about his characteristics. Nick’s
relationships are ordered in accordance with their importance for this essay’s claim.
First, the minor characters of Daisy, Tom and Jordan are treated. Then Gatsby is
introduced, and finally there is a part about Nick’s relationship with the reader.

The relation with Daisy

Leland Person suggests that “Nick's judgment of Daisy […] proceeds from the same
desire to have his broken world ‘in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever’”
For this reason Nick also seems to avoid relations with women who are too complex. Therefore, Nick is honest enough to end his “tangle back home” (59), before committing himself to anyone else, i.e. to Jordan, someone whom Nick believes, in opposition to Daisy, fits his uniform world. Seemingly inspired by the unquestionable affection and longing that Gatsby carries for Daisy and their coming love, Nick prefers a fantasy life with Jordan, as he does with the nameless women that he sees on the streets of New York:

I liked to walk up Fifth Avenue and pick out romantic women from the crowd and imagine that in a few minutes I was going to enter into their lives, and no one would ever know or disapprove. Sometimes, in my mind, I followed them to their apartments on the corners of hidden streets, and they turned and smiled back at me before they faded through a door into warm darkness. (57)

The passage reveals that Nick, rather than to have a real girlfriend who would never fit into the standards of his uniform world, likes to pretend that women on the streets are his dates. This would eliminate the complexity that he seems to associate with relationships. In the same way that Fitzgerald creates Daisy as “the embodiment of the American dream”(Boyle 25), Daisy and Gatsby become the dream that Nick desires. Boyle suggests, “I contend that Nick […] is in love with Daisy. How else can we account for Nick's failure to recognize her vanity and stupidity?” (25). In love or not, Nick seems blinded by the idea of Daisy, by her voice and appearance, rather than who she really is. When Nick describes Daisy, the notion of control is important. “She laughed again, as if she said something very witty, and held my hand for a moment, looking up into my face, promising that there was no one in the world she so much wanted to see” (11). With her appearance, Daisy seizes control over Nick and he succumbs to her in the same way as Gatsby, out of shallowness followed by deep appreciation and affection. Furthermore, Nick and Daisy are cousins, but his admiration for her surely goes further than family bonds. Daisy’s husband, the brutish man named Tom, is one of the reasons why Nick feels the need to protect her. Nick is not in love with Daisy, but she awakens something in him, a promise of something more in life, which he feels that he needs to thank her for in some sense. Upon Gatsby’s request to meet Daisy Nick answers Jordan: “Does she want to see Gatsby?” (86), and this shows that he cares for her. Together with “[t]he modesty of the demand” (85) that Nick expresses, he feels comfortable to arrange a meeting between
the two. Nick’s gratitude towards Daisy is shown by the pure devotion in his actions, making him honest with her but without hurting her.

Numerous critics have pointed out Nick’s hypocrisy, stating that even though he has eyewitness proof of Tom’s adultery, he never mentions this to Daisy. So, where is the honest Nick which he himself proclaims all the time? Cass claims that Fitzgerald’s writing suggests that Nick should not be regarded as a panderer; that it is merely a question of the author’s dilemma. “Fitzgerald’s attempts to establish the reliability of his narrator; the technical necessity of doing so in order to conceal unavoidable implausibilities” (Cass 122) is inevitably going to present Nick as a hypocrite. Cass’s position in this case makes Nick’s actions towards Daisy seem morally ambiguous, and it has even been argued that he acts as a panderer for her. When Nick sets up the meeting between Daisy and Gatsby at his house, Cass suggests: “Once the lovers have been brought together, Nick, more like a pander than a host, decorously absents himself”, but Cass also admits that “[i]t's true that Nick doesn't profit from his involvement” in a way that an actual panderer would (113). At the time when it occurred, one needs to bear in mind how society looked on women’s adultery not in favour of Daisy. However, with modern standards, a meeting of this sort, between two parts that clearly show equal affection, would probably not be considered anything but an honest action. The dishonesty in such a case would lie in an imbalanced interest between the involved parties, but conversely an “important point to recognize is that Gatsby is as much an ideal to Daisy as she is to him. Only Gatsby looks at her - creates her, makes her come to herself – ‘in a way that every young girl wants to be looked at some time’” (Person 253). One could blame Nick for being naïve about Daisy, because there are certainly flaws in her that are too easily overlooked. Unfortunately, Nick comes to the realization too late, when Mrs Wilson and Gatsby’s fate already has ended. Nick’s last judgement on Daisy is far-removed from what he thought of her in the beginning of the novel, and something he probably knew all along but was too protective of Daisy to admit:

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.… (191)

Nick’s narration in this passage reveals his true feelings towards Daisy and here he takes a final stand, ultimately distancing himself from Daisy forever.
His ambivalent actions can only be explained as actions made by one who is close to the real world. Almost as a mantra, Nick repeatedly tries to convince the audience of his honesty. Not only is this a technical device that Fitzgerald uses to persuade the audience of Nick’s reliability as a narrator, it also indicates that Nick himself believes in his own honesty. In order to be honest you must first believe in honesty, even though it can miscarry sometimes.

**The relation with Tom**

The relationship between Nick and Tom is the only one where the narrator does not experience a shift in morality, but stays with the same opinions from the beginning to the end, though he becomes more enlightened. As to real life, some people do not have a pleasant or a likeable personality and the same goes for Tom Buchannan. Through Nick’s narration it is stated that Tom comes from an “enormously wealthy” family, meaning that Tom has not himself earned the money that he spends in abundance (8). Furthermore, Nick says that Tom is “one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterward savor of anti-climax” (8), explaining that Tom lives in the past; but he also suggests that Tom is a character who will not change morally throughout the novel and neither will Nick’s opinions about him. Mellard elaborates from Nick’s claim about Tom’s lack of development:

> Such past achievement is true of Tom's football career at Yale, as well as his social and economic stature, which was passed down to him, rather than earned, and with which he lives arrogantly and brutally and selfishly. And there is nothing in Tom's present life that would suggest either intellectual or humanitarian accomplishment. (854)

The last statement undoubtedly refers to Tom’s ranting about “The Rise of the Coloured Empires” and the white race (16), which adds on to the portrait of him as an unlikeable character in the eyes of any non-racist, but also in regards to Nick’s attitude towards him. It is important to recognize Nick’s positioning towards Tom early in the novel as crucial for future events. One could suggest that Nick hides his repulsion towards him, ultimately giving him a second chance for the sake of Daisy, but nevertheless we find in his narration the possibility that something more is about to happen; “Tom would drift on forever seeking a little wistfully for the dramatic
turbulence of some irrecoverable football game” (8). Not only does Nick claim that Tom merely is a washed-out football player who only strives to get his physical, and not his intellectual, needs attended to, but Nick also plants the seed that Tom is seeking for something more, perhaps women. When Jordan finally confirms the latter, we get a situation were Nick’s honesty shines through:

I couldn’t guess what Daisy and Tom were thinking but I doubt if even Miss Baker who seemed to have mastered a certain hardy scepticism was able utterly to put this fifth guest’s shrill metallic urgency out of mind. To a certain temperament the situation might have seemed intriguing—my own instinct was to telephone immediately for the police. (19)

Nick’s loyalty to Daisy, and confirmed scepticism towards Tom, advises his morality to call the police. However, the uncertainty of the situation makes Nick delay his actions. Therefore, his modesty permits Tom to get a second chance, and because he does not want to call his judgement on the supposed affair immediately, he waits until he gets more proof.

Nevertheless, why does Nick end up at the scene of the potential affair, the one he himself was willing to call the police about? Scrimgeour takes a position and claims that Nick’s pretended honesty fails him, and the reason why is that “[Nick’s] main principle is to say nothing” (81). His silence allows him to be forced into situations like the one with Tom and Myrtle. Continually, Scrimgeour suggests that the reader should bear in mind the fact that Fitzgerald never purposely aimed to make the character of Nick dishonest. His duality is therefore claimed to be more of a fault owing to the inexperience of the author Fitzgerald, rather than intricate scheming. However, Scrimgeour seems to miss that not all men have good intentions at heart. Tom was, and is a bully, and he is a cheater who does not attempt to hide it. Nick says “[t]he fact that he had [a mistress] was insisted upon wherever he was known” (27). I do not believe Fitzgerald was a clumsy writer, on the contrary I consider his work authentic in the way it portrays very realistic humans. When Tom brutally invites Nick to meet Myrtle for the first time, it is to be understood as a conflict of power between a bully and the bullied:

Though I was curious to see her I had no desire to meet her—but I did. I went up to New York with Tom on the train one afternoon and when we stopped by the ashheaps he jumped to his feet and taking hold of my elbow literally forced me from the car. ‘We’re getting off!’ he insisted.
‘I want you to meet my girl.’ (27)

This passage reveals that Nick had no desire to meet Myrtle, but Tom forces him to follow him. In the light of Tom’s character, the situation should not be seen in the way Scrimgeour sees it; as an attempt by the author to include Nick in the affair and be an eyewitness to the adultery. Conversely, we have to understand that Tom is evil and all he wants to do is to brag about his conquests to Nick and also to put him in an uncomfortable situation. Furthermore, this is a way for Tom to goad Nick and taunt Daisy, one of many doings that make his primitive mind satisfied. Nick is simply forced into the situation out of fear of the consequences that could follow, if he denied the request from a man who has “the appearance of always leaning aggressively forward” and a body of “enormous power” (9). Even though Nick clearly does not approve of the situation he has been entangled in, he does not dare to anything else. There is more proof of Nick trying to escape from the situation that he does not morally approve of. When the party is about to enter Myrtle’s apartment, Nick stalls Tom and Myrtle with an “I have to leave you here”, but he is told by Tom not to upset Myrtle and continues to follow them (31). Up in the apartment Nick expresses: “I wanted to get out and walk eastward toward the park through the soft twilight but each time I tried to go I became entangled in some wild strident argument which pulled me back, as if with ropes, into my chair” (38). Each of these passages identifies the inner conflicts of the narrator, feeling guilty for being at the scene of the crime and being unfaithful to Daisy. His morality is put at risk now that he is being forced to do something he normally would not have done. His doubts are confirmed when Nick reflects on himself being in the apartment: “I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life” (38-39). Nick has tried to fight the situation but it has caught up with him. Even though the behaviour in the apartment repels him, it also enchant him because of the edginess around it. After trying to avoid the unavoidable, Nick has to give in to the “inexhaustible” nature of the world around that inevitably seizes him.

When Nick meets Tom in the end of the narrative, Nick’s initial statement that he “is inclined to reserve all judgements” can be questioned (3):

I shook hands with him; it seemed silly not to, for I felt suddenly as though I were talking to a child. Then he went into the jewellery store to buy a pearl necklace—or perhaps only a pair of cuff-buttons—rid of my provincial squeamishness forever. (191)
Critics try to make Nick dishonest, pointing out the hypocrisy when he shakes Tom's hand although he repelled him. Instead of hypocrisy, it should be seen as an attempt from Nick to rise above the childish actions that could have taken place. Nick could have refused to shake his hand or even tried to pick a fight with Tom, but what would he have gained. With the whole story put on paper, Nick has realized that both Tom and Daisy are lost souls, two persons whose characters will not change through his intervention, and therefore he lets them go. But to further elaborate on the issue of Nick’s “reserve[d] judgements”, Samuels interprets this scene:

So when he tells us a little later in the passage that "Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope," we know that this and not the noblesse oblige he earlier advanced explains his fear of judging. Nick cannot help judging, but he fears a world in which he is constantly beset by objects worthy of rejection. (785)

In the same way that it is impossible to be one hundred per cent morally true to yourself, it is problematic to not judge something that is found repulsive. Nick ultimately sees the end of what has been a very destructive relationship, and finds the thought liberating by saying that Tom will be “rid of my provincial squeamishness forever” (191).

The relation with Jordan

The ground, on which the relationship between Nick and Jordan stands, is ultimately Nick’s admiration for Gatsby and his desire to achieve the same thing with Jordan as Gatsby has with Daisy. Unfortunately, Nick eventually discovers that relations built on dreams and aspirations do not end well. Early in their relationship, Nick already knows and tells us that there is something about Jordan that he choses to ignore, ready to follow his dreams (22):

‘Oh, —you’re Jordan Baker.’
I knew now why her face was familiar—its pleasing contemptuous expression had looked out at me from many rotogravure pictures of the sporting life at Asheville and Hot Springs and Palm Beach. I had heard some story of her too, a critical, unpleasant story, but what it was I had forgotten long ago. (22)

The passage reveals Nick’s seemingly positive surprise when he finds out Jordan’s identity, but he also plants that there is something “unpleasant” about her. Nick and Jordan’s relation involves a sexual tension already in their first encounter. Nick seems
to react in a sexual way, rather than emotional, and acts carefully as though she is an exotic animal. Twice he says he is about to apologize to her, just for entering the room, and he goes on thinking: “Almost any exhibition of complete self sufficiency draws a stunned tribute from me” (12). This would suggest that he is drawn to her mystique. However, from the moment he realizes, “Oh, —you’re Jordan Baker”, the “sort of—oh—fling” that Daisy had insisted on before, is more than a just a fling (22). He takes a chance and continues to hang out with Jordan, and at Gatsby’s first party, we detect Nick’s insecurity; “I was still with Jordan Baker” (51). Evidently, he is surprised by the fact that she remained by his side. This further encourages him to seek comfort in her, and undoubtedly her jauntiness and celebrity would be appealing to most men. Nick describes the development of their relation; “At first I was flattered to go places with her because she was a golf champion and every one knew her name. Then it was something more. I wasn’t actually in love, but I felt a sort of tender curiosity” (63). Unlike the unchanging relation Nick has with Tom, Nick and Jordan’s company depends entirely on Nick’s growth and his moral journey.

Thomas Hanzo states that *The Great Gatsby* is essentially a “conflict between the surviving puritan morality of the west and the post-war hedonism of the east” (69). In the same way Gatsby and Daisy’s relation embodies this conflict, so does the company of Nick and Jordan. Nick comes east with ambitions and dreams, which he sees in Gatsby and tries to achieve with Jordan. For Nick, Jordan resembles something very different from what he has ever encountered before, celebrity and casual bonding. When Nick finally remembers the “unpleasant” event that had “eluded” him before, and describes Jordan as “incurably dishonest” (64), he does not show any proof of “puritan morality”: “It made no difference to me. Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply—I was casually sorry, and then I forgot” (64). What Nick actually shows, is what newly found affection could do to you. He has no right to blame Jordan for her actions in the past, so he chooses to give her the benefit of the doubt.

Nick’s appreciation of the East, the city and Jordan, is shown right after the revelation of Gatsby’s affection for Daisy:

Unlike Gatsby and Tom Buchanan I had no girl whose disembodied face floated along the dark cornices and blinding signs and so I drew up the girl beside me, tightening my arms. Her wan, scornful mouth smiled and so I drew her up again, closer, this time to my face. (86)
This suggests that Gatsby’s feelings are shadowed by Nick and as soon as Gatsby’s relationship with Daisy falls apart, so does Nick’s. Thus, this collapse will eventually make “Gatsby’s defeat bring down Carraway’s dream as well” (Scrimgeour 80). However, Scrimgeour’s statement is perhaps not entirely accurate. That Nick’s relationship mirrors Gatsby’s is true, but not that Nick’s dream has been brought down. Nick indicates that Gatsby’s life has been a facade: “The lawn and drive had been crowded with the faces of those who guessed at his corruption—and he had stood on those steps, concealing his incorruptible dream, as he waved them goodbye” (165). Gatsby’s waving goodbye is a symbol of Nick’s realisation that Gatsby’s dream was not his, and his aspirations have changed.

More proof of Nick’s moral growth is shown in the next passage. Eventually, we find Nick in a situation of breaking up with Jordan. Scrimgeour argues that this ‘clean break’ is proof of Nick’s moral madness: “He is a moral eunuch, ineffectual in any real human situation that involves more than a reflex action determined by social pattern or the desire to avoid trouble with” (83). In opposition to this, Samuels suggest that the break up “is [a] measure of Nick’s growth. Discovering Gatsby in the act of writing about him, Nick discovers that he has deluded himself, that he had been dishonest, and that he had better go back and start all over” (792). Nick’s relationship with Jordan has throughout the novel depended on Gatsby, and it seemingly mirrors Nick’s moral journey. After Myrtle’s death Nick questions his entanglement with Jordan and turns down her invitation to enter Daisy’s house, which is the beginning of Nick’s and Jordan’s break-up. Nick turning down Jordan is a direct effect of the events that happen at the hotel when Gatsby’s truth is revealed and the beginning of his end starts. Nick too, is a man who learns from his mistakes and his ambivalence in honesty towards Jordan is a result of his trying to figure out his meaning in life. Unfortunately, the biggest mistake he makes is that he tries to imitate a man whose dream was already doomed to fail.

The relation with Gatsby

The relationship between Nick and Gatsby is the most important friendship of the novel. The way in which Nick and Gatsby are involved is essential to understanding Nick’s change in morality. His ambivalence to Gatsby is shown in many ways, and
one of them is that Nicks’ narration seems to reveal a reluctance towards Gatsby, but conversely the reader might trace Nick’s awe between the lines:

“They’re a rotten crowd,” I shouted across the lawn. “You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together.” I’ve always been glad I said that. It was the only compliment I ever gave him, because I disapproved of him from beginning to end. (164)

Nick’s description of his relationship with Gatsby, explains his ambivalent emotions towards the man occupying ‘the colossal affair’ next door. That Nick has disapproved of Gatsby all along does seem hard to grasp since the book he is writing is after all a tribute to ‘The Great Gatsby’. This paragraph is a proof of Nick’s moral journey; only one single spoken compliment in life, but we as readers have conversely witnessed at least a few compliments regarding Gatsby as we read the narrative. For example, when Nick meets Gatsby for the first time, he describes that he “was looking at an elegant young rough-neck, a year or two over thirty, whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd” (53). This line is one of a few that express Nick’s awe of Gatsby in other words than direct compliments. In the end, the whole narrative is a huge compliment to Gatsby.

Nick and Gatsby’s journey begin before they have actually met. Nick collects gossip and stories from his environment and they all add on to the mystery about Gatsby; “Somebody told me they thought he killed a man once […] he was a German spy during the war […] it couldn’t be that, because he was in the American army during the war” (48). Nick is inevitably trapped, as everybody else, by Gatsby’s enchanting secrets, and this could explain why Nick, on their first encounter, describes Gatsby similarly to someone who has just descended from heaven. Nick elaborates on Gatsby’s smile: “It understood you just so far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey” (53). Already from this moment, it is reassured that Nick is devoted to Gatsby in a way that he himself would never admit. What Nick sees in Gatsby, and in his smile, is the promise of the impossible. Nevertheless, Nick also sees a confirmation of his own honesty in Gatsby: “[He] believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself.” Gatsby’s smile confirms Nick’s existence, suggesting that this would force Nick to be honest when he is ultimately writing, and narrating the story about the man he owes his life to. Mellard elaborates on Gatsby’s influence on Nick: “The legacy Gatsby
leaves to Carraway is exactly that - a promise of life that can be redeemed in his own world and in his own terms” (859). Mellard confirms the important meaning of Gatsby’s legacy left to Nick, and the reason why Nick stays true to Gatsby even after his death.

Eventually Nick becomes introduced to Gatsby’s story and his desire to meet Daisy. Many critics have argued for Nick’s weak morality, when he seemingly acts the panderer for Gatsby when he sets up the meeting between Gatsby and Daisy at Nick’s house. Boyle argues, “Nick's honesty and moral responsibility are manifested by his easy decision to play the panderer for Gatsby; it was ’such a little thing’” (22). R.W Stallman further elaborates on Nick’s hypocrisy: “Though Nick disbelieves in it, he nevertheless arranges for the reunion of the lovers whom time has divorced, and thereby he involves himself, Honest Nick, in the adulterous affair and shares the responsibility for its consequences” (138). But to answer these suspicions, Cass replies that in a case of pandering, the panderer should receive something in gratitude for given services, and that leaves us with the problem of motive “since Nick does not profit in any financial way, [and] the usual motive for a pimp is absent. What, then, is Nick's motive?” (Cass 114). The question is legitimate and Cass explains the motive by stating that it ultimately depends on the first person narrative, and the pander business is just a result of Fitzgerald’s struggle to place Nick at the scene of the event. However, I would like to argue that the question should be rephrased, asking why Nick should not pander for Gatsby? Gatsby, who according to Nick has the quality of a “heightened sensitivity to the promises of life” (4), inspires him to believe in hope and love, and Daisy’s abused relation with Tom, one that makes Nick want “to telephone immediately for the police” (19), are circumstances that make this pandering situation seem justifiable. Nick knows in fact very much of Tom’s affair and of his dangerous temperament, since he does not hesitate to beat women, i.e. when Tom “broke [Myrtle’s] nose with his open hand” (41). These factors need to be considered before we condemn Nick of pandering and lacking in morality. Conversely, Nick might be considered as having done a wonderful deed, helping Daisy and Gatsby to meet, although they might not deserve it. Nick tries to help Daisy to find a way out of a destructive marriage, and he helps Gatsby who by this point of the novel is a man he barely knows. One could object that is a part of the problem that Nick and Gatsby have just met, but since Nick does not know Gatsby, in a way he thinks that he knows him by projecting his own hopefulness onto him.
That Nick’s path is closely linked to Gatsby’s is obvious. They are both men from the west travelling east to fulfil their dreams. As soon as Nick is captivated in Gatsby’s world, his admiration grows with every new secret that is revealed. After Jordan has told Nick the story of Gatsby and Daisy and forwarded Gatsby’s question, Nick’s awe is displayed in the following words: “The modesty of the demand shook me. He had waited five years and bought a mansion where he dispensed starlight to casual moths so that he could ‘come over’ some afternoon to a stranger’s garden” (85). However, Nick shows proof of interpreting this relation as something that belongs to the past. Already in Gatsby’s mansion, right after their secret first encounter, Nick says:

Daisy put her arm through his abruptly but he seemed absorbed in what he had just said. Possibly, it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one. (100)

The fact that Nick sees that Gatsby’s dream is unattainable, before it has even started, does show great ambivalence in Nick. He is too much of a realist to believe that Gatsby’s envisioned dream will end happily, but he is so inspired by Gatsby that he hopes that this unconventional way of striving for love is possible. That would explain why Nick continues to go out with Jordan, despite the fact that he has admitted to himself and to the reader that what Gatsby tries to do is impossible. Later on, Nick says to Gatsby: “You can’t repeat the past” and Gatsby answers “Can’t repeat the past? […] Why of course you can!” (118). Scrimgeour suggests that Gatsby’s believes “to repeat the past is to suppress unwanted elements of it and to select only nice things from which to make an uncontaminated present” (78), a confused understanding of life, which Nick does not share and also tries to point out to Gatsby. Nick once again concludes that Gatsby’s “modest proposal” in fact was only just a dream.

A very important argument, perhaps the most important argument of all in support of Nick’s moral integrity, is the one pointing out that Nick, of all persons, is the only one that stays true to Gatsby until the very end. Scrimgeour states that “Honesty can in the end be based only on some kind of powerful drive, and this is something that Carraway does not possess” (82), suggesting that Nick is such a weak character that honesty cannot be a part of his character. Boyle goes on by adding; “For
Nick, too, the easiest way is best; compromise is his modus operandi” (23), pointing out that Nick would always choose to avoid difficulties if possible. If we were to assume that Nick is as dishonest as Scrimgeour and Boyle argue, it could become hard to explain why he goes through all the trouble of taking care of Gatsby’s legacy after his death. It seems like a big commitment to arrange a funeral for someone who is lacking in character and rather flees than fights. The most convincing proof of Nick as an honest character is what he does after Gatsby’s death. However, we have critics that argue that many of the ‘implausibilities’ that occur in the book happen because Fitzgerald was unaware of his narrator’s ‘dual nature’ and that he was “never a great critical theorist” (Scrimgeour 76). Similarly, Cass states that “Fitzgerald must resort to [implausibilities] so that the main events in the plot will befall as he imagined them, and so that Nick, his first-person narrator, will have first-hand knowledge about the key scenes in somebody else's love affair” (117). With this theory in mind, Cass suggests “Gatsby's chauffeur and other servants need to ignore gunshots on the grounds so that Nick can be present when the bodies are discovered” (117). Conversely, I want to argue that Fitzgerald did not need the implausibilities, and he was probably aware of Nick’s duality. For example we see that the actual story of Gatsby, in the first half of chapter six, is totally covered by a reporter, where Gatsby is stated as the first hand source, “He told me all this very much later” (Fitzgerald 108). By doing this Nick shows, and so does Fitzgerald, that Nick does not at all need to be the first-hand source of all the actions. If he was not intended to be at the scene, a similar construction as in chapter 6 could just have been applied. When it comes to Nick’s duality, I once again would like to press that his ambivalent character must be seen as decisions made and actions taken, by a person in a process of moral growth. If we look back at the scene of Nick discovering Gatsby’s and Mr Wilson’s bodies, it should not be looked at as an implausibility that the servants did not react to the gunshot. These people were in fact not servants but gangsters, “Wolfshiem’s protégés” (172). To believe that they would react in the manner a real servant would, or that they would bother to check where the noise came from, would be naïve. The focus should instead be on Nick and how he, from this moment, decides not to allow Gatsby’s dream to be rendered pointless. Beautifully described, Nick shows insight into Gatsby’s final moments:
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. (172)

The passage shows that Nick really believes that Gatsby “turned out all right at the end” (4). Because, even though Gatsby did not get what he desired, Nick imagines that he finally understood the way of life, brutal but honest. It is perhaps morbid to call a dead man “turn[ing] out all right” but what Nick aims to get at is that Gatsby finally comprehended his reality. Whether through admiration or pity, Nick shows a strong character by taking care of the heritage of a man who has achieved so much, with so little to begin with. On the surface, it is easy to grasp that Nick longed for the life that Gatsby lived, so much that he tried to make it his own by i.e. by dating Jordan. However, essentially it is not the American dream symbolized in Gatsby that makes Nick stay after Gatsby’s’ death, it is the romantic hope. A parallel can be drawn to the Dutch sailors in Nick’s concluding words of the narrative: “I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world” (193). Gatsby is the “green breast of the new world” that Nick sees and longs for, and he symbolizes the infinite romantic hope that means so much for Nick that he ultimately wants to pass on Gatsby’s legacy.

Reaching the end of the narrative, Nick displays more and more affection for the late Gatsby. When he meets up with Gatsby’s father, Nick sees Gatsby’s schedule from his youth, and father utters, “It just shows you” (185). This proof of Gatsby’s strong devotion gives Nick further reason to take care of Gatsby’s legacy. He also answers the father’s question “‘were you a friend of my boy’s, Mr?’ ‘-We were close friends’” (179). Their friendship, the fact that Nick is the only one at Gatsby’s funeral, and ultimately that Nick writes the book The Great Gatsby suggests that Nick is honest, though ambivalent, when he struggles to understand the mysterious character of Jay Gatsby.

When we first are introduced to the character of Nick, he shares with us the words of his father “just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had”, and Nick has “[i]n consequence [been] inclined to reserve all judgments” (3). What most critics have done is to carry this statement further and use it as advantage against Nick, suggesting that he is in fact very
judgemental on numerous occasions. However, if we closely examine the words of Nick’s father, it is clear that Nick is supposed to remember that some people come from a different background than him. Because we know that Nick has a privileged background, coming from a prominent and well-to-do family in the west, we could also add Tom, Daisy and Jordan to that list of people having had advantages in life. The only one of Nick’s relationships that is excluded from that list is friendship with Gatsby, to whom Nick stays true to the very end. This needs to be seen in perspective of Nick’s moral journey, because at first he gets enchanted by the mystery of Gatsby, and does not know anything about Gatsby’s background. But later, in the light of all the events that have taken place, Nick seems to remember the words of his father as he is struggling with his own morality. He concludes that Gatsby is the one of whom he is inclined to reserve all judgements. When Nick frames his coming story of Gatsby, this is precisely the way he has chosen to understand judgement.

The relation with the reader

The last and the most significant relation in this novel is the one between Nick and the reader. The whole notion of reliability and honesty depends on how well Nick establishes his trustworthiness towards the target audience. Not only does Nick argue honesty in the beginning of the novel, he continually brings forth arguments for his reliability as the story goes on. He calls himself as honest and on two occasions, he describes himself as being wrongfully accused. First on the train when the woman drops her pocket-book: “I picked it up with a weary bend and handed it back to her, holding it at arm's length and by the extreme tip of the corners to indicate that I had no designs upon it - but every one near by, including the woman, suspected me just the same” (122). The second time is at Myrtle’s apartment:

“Crazy about him [Mr Wilson]!” cried Myrtle incredulously. “Who said I was crazy about him? I never was any more crazy about him than I was about that man there.” She pointed suddenly at me, and every one looked at me accusingly. I tried to show by my expression that I expected no affection. (39)

Here Nick seemingly uses this specific recite of his narrative to prove that he is in fact honest, by showing that he is being wrongfully accused. Some critics have argued that Fitzgerald constructed Nick to repeatedly claim his honesty in his narration to hide his character’s duality. Cass says the method of doing this on numerous occasions helps
to hide the implausibility he continues to mention (117). Scrimgeour suggest something similar, asking the question whether Nick’s characterization of himself is “as accurate as it is influential?” (77). On the other hand, Town argues that Nick does mean to be reliable and comments on his inclination to reserve his judgements:

In other words, the question is not whether Nick means what he says: Nick means to be reliable, but his language is unreliable, and the question becomes one of metaphorical instead of psychological reliability. The effect of this trait is that Nick and the reader, from the first page of the novel, struggle for control over interpretation, engaging in an elaborate dance of acceptance and rejection of narrative authority. […] Surely even the most sceptical reader would not be suspicious of Nick already - we are only on page 1! The effect of Nick’s pleading is to put the reader in the position of defending Nick’s honour - or his sanity - a position that is crucial to the success of the narration. (Town 499-500)

Therefore, it is important for Nick to repeatedly plead his honesty: he needs to establish his reliability towards the reader early on in order to succeed in his narrative. The question is not about Fitzgerald trying to manoeuvre the reader into looking in another direction, it is about true honesty towards the reader. Do not a couple plea vows before marriage? Nick’s action is a commitment to the reader, saying “If I mean to be honest to you, will you believe in what I am about to say?” Nick is not asking for blind faith, but for the reader to have tolerance and to keep an open mind towards his narration. He is only a human being with human traits, something that Fitzgerald captured very well.

Nick’s hypocrisy through the novel is one of the critics’ main concerns. In a case such as this, when the narrator is also a character, the outcome of the story is based on the individuals’ interpretation. Scrimgeour elaborates and says: “When a narrator is also a character, with all that this implies of personality, individuality, and responsibility, we readers are forced to be more alert. We must question the accuracy of the narrator's account” (76). Therefore, it is up to the reader to judge whether Nick’s ambivalence is a trait of a dishonest character or a person experiencing a moral growth. The trustworthiness of the narrator is not established through repetitive claims of honesty, but by showing remorse and having the ability to change. Consequently, Nick is charged with hypocrisy when he is honest to himself and admits his wrongdoings. Jordan likes Nick for not being a careless person, but later on claims that he has mistreated her, saying: “I thought you were rather an honest,
straightforward person. I thought it was your secret pride” and Nick answers “I am thirty. […] I'm five years too old to lie to myself and call it honesty” (190). Rather than seeing this as a measure of Nick’s growth, Scrimgeour argues, “Jordan is right about Carraway's character. The crisis of their affair reveals to her what she must have suspected before, that Carraway is neither as honest nor as high-principled as he might like to seem” (81). However, Scrimgeour misses the point that Nick has finally come to an understanding, or as Samuels puts it “Nick discovers that he had deluded himself, that he had been dishonest, and that he had better go back and start all over” (792). Although what Samuels is saying is true, we cannot deny that Nick was dishonest towards Jordan and we as readers clearly see the ambivalence in our narrator. I am of the opinion that the reader should regard Nick’s remorse and ability to change higher than his dishonesty, because a person who is willing to admit his own mistakes is ultimately a more reliable narrator than someone who seems flawless.

Conclusion

In all of Nick’s relations, he struggles to understand the other person in order to place him or her in accordance with his own beliefs and morality. As the narrative progresses, Nick too changes his opinions about the people he meets, and goes through a moral journey that makes him see things differently in life. Gatsby, the man who gave the narrative its name, inspired Nick to the point that he decided to put the story down on paper. Initially, Nick was intrigued by the life that Gatsby showed him, but in retrospect, it was the promise of the romantic hope that eventually made Nick take care of Gatsby’s legacy and not the American dream.

I want to argue that we as readers must view Nick as an honest person who tries to fit in to a dishonest world, struggling as a boat against the current. In the same way that Nick shows his scepticism towards Gatsby, ignores the fact that Jordan is an incurable liar, is judgemental towards Tom, and actually lets Daisy get away with murder, we as readers judge Nick for his actions. Through the narrative, the reader changes opinion about Nick as he tries to understand the equation of life. Ultimately, Nick should not be judged on who he is, but rather on who he becomes in the end. His moral journey takes him to mysterious places, where there is no black and white, and we cannot blame him for changing his mind about people. Nick welcomes Daisy and Jordan with open arms but they did not grow when he did, and as a result he has to
leave them to figure it out on their own. The same goes for Tom, who was not a decent man to start with and who never shows any intentions to grow. Although Gatsby never showed any significant proof of growing, he is the source of Nick’s insights. Gatsby is never unjust or unfriendly to Nick and he has inspired Nick with the belief that love, hope, and dreams can take you far in life. Through Nick, Fitzgerald shows us that if you enter life with good intentions “you will be all right in the end.” By depicting a human being Fitzgerald makes The Great Gatsby a story we can identify with, in terms of the dilemmas of life. Nick is not a superhero but neither is he a villain. He is just a modest man, with human traits and an ambition to do his best. With the first person narrative, Fitzgerald successfully presents Nick’s narration as a way to see the situations he gets entangled in, and struggles to be honest in, when he occasionally finds out that the world is corrupt.
Works Cited


