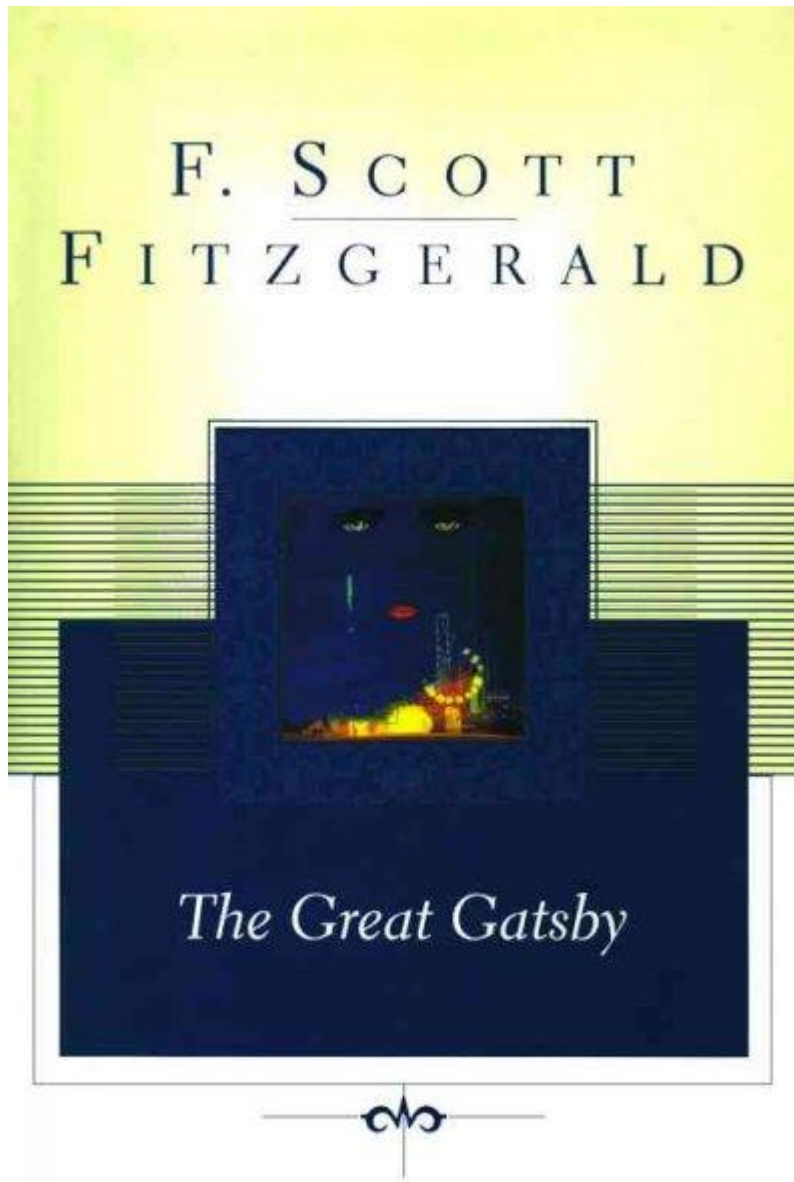


## About the book...



Nick Carraway, a transplanted Midwesterner, buys a house in West Egg, Long Island. Soon he is caught up in a circle of wealthy friends who attend fabulous parties. The friends include his distant cousin Daisy Buchanan, once the object of the attentions of Jay Gatsby. Through the circle of friends, Nick meets Gatsby and becomes fascinated by this man of great wealth and prestige. Then tragedy strikes, interrupting the social swirl Nick and the others had been drawn into.

## About the author... (*NoveList*)

Born September 24, 1896 in Saint Paul, Minnesota, Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was a distant descendant of the writer of the national anthem. His mother's family had money, his father's family had breeding, but combined they were not well off or elite. Fitzgerald was

the darling of the household growing up, and he developed a fondness for associating with the socially successful. He went on to a disappointing academic career at Princeton, where he was briefly involved with a wealthy socialite whom he had no chance of winning.

In 1920, Fitzgerald's first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, established him as a literary force. He married Zelda Sayre of Montgomery, Alabama. The couple first tried to live in New York, as well as the surrounding areas, and then in Europe. As part of the expatriate community, Fitzgerald struck up a friendship with the relatively unknown Ernest Hemingway. Their friendship soon died in the face of Hemingway's ego. The Fitzgeralds' marriage was rocky, to say the least, and by 1930 Zelda was in one of the many sanatoriums where she would spend much of the rest of her life. The one lasting product of their marriage was their daughter, Scottie.

The Fitzgeralds were spendthrift and always in debt, so Scott expended much of his creative energy on short stories that fetched a handsome price. After *The Great Gatsby* came out in 1926, he did not publish another book until the hauntingly powerful *Tender is the Night* came out in 1934. This book did not have nearly the commercial or critical success of *The Great Gatsby*, and the public began to regard Fitzgerald as essentially washed up. Mired in increasing alcoholism, Fitzgerald went to Hollywood in the early 1930s to write screenplays, but his only screen credit was for *Three*

*Comrades*. When he died in 1940, he left behind an unfinished manuscript, *The Last Tycoon*. After his death, Fitzgerald was out of fashion in the forties, but writers, scholars, and the public began to rediscover him in the 1950s.

## **Reviews**

### *Magill Book Review:*

First published in 1925, *The Great Gatsby* was not a commercial success; both *This Side Of Paradise* and *The Beautiful And The Damned* outsold it by a margin of more than two to one during Fitzgerald's lifetime. Initial reviews were mixed; a few critics--and some of Fitzgerald's fellow-novelists--immediately appreciated what he had achieved. By the time of his death, in 1940, the novel was largely forgotten.

As sometimes happens in the curious business of literary reputations, Fitzgerald's death prompted a revival of interest in his work. In 1941, *The Great Gatsby* was reissued, bound in a single volume with the unfinished novel *The Last Tycoon*, which was being published for the first time. A year later, *The Great Gatsby* was reissued on its own, and several reprints followed in the 1940's. By the 1950's, it was widely regarded as one of the major novels of its period. Today, *Gatsby* is almost universally acknowledged as an American classic. It is one of those exceptional books that survive both inside and outside the classroom; it's also a novel that writers continue to

read with profit, as interviews with many contemporary American novelists attest.

*The Atlantic:*

“Since it was first published, in 1925, *The Great Gatsby* has established itself as an American classic more tellingly, as a classic that people actually read, and love. There are some good reasons for this. Fitzgerald's novel is at once formally elegant and piercingly romantic in its expression - a compelling story, but one imbued with the features of legend. It goes off like a flashbulb, freezing a bold array of images on the retina; the fade is delicious, stirring. And then there is the beauty of the writing, the lyric thrill of the sentences.”

*New Statesman:*

Mr Fitzgerald's story of New York's Bohemian and Smart Sets has qualities that remove it from the ruck of such novels. *The Great Gatsby* himself is drawn with spirit and insight and humour, a man who, though many kinds of rogue, is yet an idealist and dreamer of dreams. When we first meet him, Gatsby is the centre of a flamboyant society that sponges upon, despises and slanders him. He is living in an enormous and pretentious mansion on Long Island, where he keeps open house. We soon learn that this ostentation of wealth is but a means to an end. During the war Gatsby, a young officer with nothing but his pay, had met and loved a young woman of the established rich

and his love had been returned. This girl is now married to a wealthy man of her own class who is notoriously unfaithful to her. They are living on Long Island and Gatsby is there to meet her. He does, and for a time it seems that he will succeed in winning her from her husband, but in the end she cheats him, and he is killed in error by a man whom the husband has wronged. Mr Fitzgerald is a satirist with a pretty thick velvet glove. When the narrator of the story tells the unhappy Gatsby that he is the best of the bunch, we agree. --"The Great Gatsby."

## Literary Criticism

Title: Style as Politics in *The Great Gatsby*

Author(s): Janet Giltrow and David Stouck

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[(essay date winter 1997) *In the following essay, Giltrow and Stouck use discourse analysis to show that the novel's linguistic subtleties mask ideas of social conservatism.*]

***The Great Gatsby*** is valued for the vividness with which it renders an historical era; perhaps more than

by any other American novel written in the 1920s, we are convinced that we hear the voices of people speaking from that decade before the advent of talking motion pictures. As narrator, Nick is the medium by which those voices are heard and, as principal speaker in the text, he serves as a translator of the dreams and social ambitions of the people who surround him. But the dilemma for readers of the novel is how to interpret Nick's voice: is he genuinely critical of Gatsby's romantic imagination and the culture that informed it, or does his suave talk conceal an essentially conservative nature?

Major statements on the novel in the last twenty years identify important elements of cultural criticism in the text. Ross Posnock's Lukácsian reading, grounded in Marx's account of commodity fetishism, views Fitzgerald (and the story's narrator) as primarily a critic rather than an exponent of the American Dream; his assurance of the speaker's critical purpose is such that he can claim "the novel's account of man's relation to society ... profoundly agrees with Marx's great discovery that it is social rather than individual consciousness that determine's man's existence" (p. 202).<sup>1</sup> Even Judith Fetterley, in her denunciation of the text's misogyny, allows that "certainly there is in the Carraway/Fitzgerald mind an element that is genuinely and meaningfully critical of the Gatsby imagination and that exposes rather than imitates it" (p. 99).<sup>2</sup> Less certain of the text's radical intent is a 'queer' reading by Edward Wasiolek who locates one of the novel's

meanings in the conservatism of what he alleges to be Nick's repressed homosexuality. According to Wasiolek, Nick does not act on his intense feelings for Gatsby, but remains a voyeur, and he draws attention to a masturbatory image and rhythm in the last lines of the text ("So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past") to suggest a regressive infantilism at the novel's center.<sup>3</sup> And in a deconstructionist study that negotiates the competing claims of psychoanalysis, feminism, and Marxism, Gregory S. Jay suggests in passing that Nick's identification with Gatsby belongs to that conservative order of social bonding wherein women are viewed as possessions in male power games.<sup>4</sup> But Jay also argues for the radical nature of the text asserting that ***The Great Gatsby*** is "a work of cultural criticism that enacts ... the intellectual analysis of how the social subject can never be conceived, even *ab ovo*, as the inhabitant of a world outside commodification, exchange, spectacle, and in speculation" (pp. 164-65). Then Jay asks, concerning the moment in the text when Daisy weeps over Gatsby's shirts, does Nick reproduce the scene for us to read critically, or does he endorse Daisy's emotion--her thrill and sense of loss at both the reach and the limits of Gatsby's imagination? In other words, he asks (as if uncertain about the large claims he has made of the text's design), where does Nick stand?

In this essay we shall approach the question of critical intent and execution through an examination of the

novel's style.<sup>5</sup> We shall use traditional accounts of English syntax to describe Fitzgerald's at sentence level, but we shall also use techniques from discourse analysis and linguistic pragmatics that will help us investigate stylistic features that operate beyond the sentence, in the arena of language as socially situated, as utterance addressed and received both within the text and as an exchange between reader and writer. One of the major criticisms of stylistics, voiced strongly by Stanley E. Fish, is that observable formal patterns are in themselves without value, or else that stylistics assigns them value in a wholly arbitrary fashion, without regard to contexts of reception and reader expectation (p. 70).<sup>6</sup> Respectful of such criticisms, we point out that our analysis is inspired by advances in critical linguistics that insist that style is motivated--by context, by differentials of position, by political interest. Instead of presenting observed features of Fitzgerald's style as isolated formalities, we locate them in larger contexts, and explain how these contexts motivate the book's wordings. First we situate our findings in a consideration of mode in the novel: in the naive (or folk) romance mode as it is historically manifested in the American Dream, and in its ironic version manifested in this narrator's account of flagrant partying that convenes the tokens of social class in America. Then, after examining certain ways of speaking that adhere to the narrator's midwestern origins, we will claim that language in ***The Great Gatsby*** provides us with evidence for the multiple, seemingly contradictory readings of the book. We will

show that alongside the expose of American materialism--the irresponsible behaviors of the wealthy class, the corruption in business practice--there remains a conservatism, a resistance to change, and that both are evident in the book's language. In the manner of Nick's speaking, we find evidence that the critical inclination of ***The Great Gatsby*** is not just towards reform but towards restoration--restoration of a social order that has been confused and disturbed by reconfigurations of power and property, by the disheveling forces of the age.

## I

The novel's narrator, Nick Carraway, tells two stories: one about his fabulous neighbor, the other, less obviously, about himself. The story he tells of Jay Gatsby, in its barest outlines, follows the pattern of romance, that reading of the individual life as an identity quest. Joseph Campbell and Northrop Frye have both described the structure of romance narrative and the trajectory of the hero's progression: from obscure origins he or she journeys into the unknown where an enemy, a lover, and a mentor all play crucial roles in identifying who the hero is and where he or she fits into the world. More recently, Michel Foucault defines succinctly the essence of the romance mode when he writes that the modern man is not the man who attempts to discover his personal secrets and his hidden truths; rather "he is the man who tries to invent himself," who is compelled "to face the task of producing himself" (p. 42).<sup>7</sup> For such an individual,

writes Foucault, the high value of the present is indissociable from an eagerness "to imagine it otherwise than it is" (p. 41). Foucault uses the term "modern man" rather than romance hero, but his concept of modernity is not tied to an historical epoch. Rather, he suggests that modernity be considered an attitude, a mode of relating to contemporary reality that can be found in other periods of history, consisting essentially of "the will to 'heroize' the present" (p. 40). Issues of identity, the nature of power and, in Foucault's terminology, an engagement with the Other--these all lie at the heart of the romance mode and bear on any reading of Gatsby's story.

Stretched over much of the narrative is the mystery of Gatsby's origins: rumored to be a nephew or a cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm, and claiming himself to be the scion of a wealthy, English-educated family, Gatsby, Nick learns eventually, is actually James Gatz, the son of "shiftless and unsuccessful farm people" from North Dakota (p. 104).<sup>8</sup> Gatsby's rejection of these humble origins is signaled by a name change, an "immigrant" surname anglicized and a formal first name made familiar and fashionable sounding. This reinvention begins when Gatsby is seventeen, when he leaves home and family behind and moves into a world of "reveries,"<sup>9</sup> where on moonlit nights "the most grotesque and fantastic conceits haunted him in his bed" (p. 105). Historically, this transformation takes place in the era when the robber barons were the model for power and success. For Gatsby, born on the

margins, Daisy Fay is the embodiment of both success and the unknown; her privileged social status renders her a mysterious cynosure of sexual attraction, wealth, and social belonging, and when he kisses her she becomes the incarnation of his dreams and "unutterable visions" (p. 117). Nick writes that in loving her Gatsby "committed himself to the following of a grail" (p. 156); that Daisy was "[h]igh in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl" (p. 127). But Gatsby does not meet the test of wealth in Daisy's society (that specifically American measure of the romance quest), and he loses her to a rival suitor, Tom Buchanan. The spell Daisy casts with her voice--that "low, thrilling" siren's voice with its "singing compulsion" (p. 14) that "couldn't be overdreamed" (p. 101)--has been broken when Gatsby can say bluntly to Nick, "Her voice is full of money," and Nick recognizes that indeed its "inexhaustible charm," "the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it" was simply that--the seductive power of riches (p. 127). Situated at the heart of Gatsby's story is the metanarrative central to American culture--the deeply conservative ideology of capitalism, the story of rags to riches, of power, love and fame achieved through personal wealth.

It is the narrator's role to discredit this myth. The story he tells of Gatsby bereft of this illusion is a story of violence, despair, and ghostliness--a fantastic dream, distorted and grotesque, like a "night scene by El Greco" (p. 185). Gatsby, he reveals, has no wise mentor to lead him on his journey; older men like Dan

Cody and Meyer Wolfsheim have shown him the path of deceit and felony, and he follows it until one of the "ghosts ... gliding toward him through the amorphous trees" (p. 169) takes his life. Gatsby does not emerge from his journey a hero reborn with the power to bestow boons on his fellows; Nick describes instead a wasteland, the valley of ashes, which grows while the obscure movements of the ash-grey men in the dumping grounds are watched over by the blinded eyes of Dr. Eckleburg. Nick tells of Gatsby's father entering the narrative not to reveal that his son was of distinguished parentage, but to offer another kind of testimony, a book and a schedule for improvement--the humble fragments of a national myth (the Ben Franklin, Horatio Alger formula) that has deluded his ambitious son.

On the level of plot then the sophisticated narrator seems to impugn the American dream, its illusions and excesses--he refers scornfully to Gatsby's "appalling sentimentality" (p. 118) and to the "foul dust" that "floated in the wake of his dreams" (p. 6). But syntactically, in some of the most beautifully wrought and memorable lines of the novel, Nick Carraway demonstrates not scorn but, rather, ready sympathy for Gatsby and for those ideological presuppositions that underlie his ambitions. Nick tells Gatsby's story in what Bakhtin would describe as a lyrical style, "poetic in the narrow sense," without dialogue, the words sufficient unto themselves, "suspended from any mutual interaction with alien discourse."<sup>10</sup> This lyricism is

accomplished grammatically in the continuation of sentences seemingly reluctant to end, sentences which go on after a syntactic core has delivered its message. Offering a profile of the narrative style Fitzgerald has given Nick, we suggest that, characteristically, the first part of the sentence, sometimes just an independent clause, does the work of the plot, moving the narrative forward in time and place and event, but a second part, often syntactically unnecessary, can go on to evoke feelings and indefinite excitements and to suggest matters that exist only in the realm of possibility and the imagination. These *sentence endings* are the site of poetic invention, which imagines the world "otherwise than it is,"<sup>11</sup> cultivates heightened sensation, and registers the romantic conceits and aspirations of ambition.

In Nick's way of speaking, the core of the narrative sentence establishes focus on time, place, event; drawn-out endings evoke accumulations of romantic sensitivity. Consider Nick's account of Gatsby's entry into his dream world:

For a while these reveries provided an outlet for his imagination; they were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing.(p. 105)

This sentence begins, characteristically, with a time-adverbial, establishing duration and "reveries" as what is being talked about, then elaborates itself, through a second-start "they," into apposition--syntactically

unnecessary, surplus, but seemingly engendered by sensitivity to words like "imagination" and "reverie." The tenuous subject of reverie and the imagination is then extended to even more tenuous matters in a "hint" and a "promise," but in the lush and improbable ending of the sentence occurs the "fairy's wing" that connects directly to the embodiment of Gatsby's dreaming, Daisy Buchanan, whose maiden name is Fay, an archaic variant of fairy. Nick hereby conveys an aura of magical destiny to Gatsby's adventure, as does the ending of another trailing sentence where Daisy is described as "gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor" (p. 157). In this instance we glimpse something of the feudal heart of the American myth of riches.

The most evocative sentence endings are frequently constructed as elaborate appositives; they adumbrate the poetry of wealth and possessions. Nick describes in this way Gatsby's romantic excitement as a young army officer when he first views Daisy's house:

*There was a ripe mystery about it, a hint of bedrooms more beautiful and cool than other bedrooms, of gay and radiant activities taking place through its corridors, and of romances that were not musty and laid away already in lavender, but fresh and breathing and redolent of this year's shining motor-cars and of dances whose flowers were scarcely withered.* (p. 155, emphasis added)

Everything contained in the appositive is suggestive, an elaboration of the mystery that surrounds Daisy, heightened especially by the ephemeral and transient nature of time present. Nick's own sensitivity to the passage of time is revealed in another sentence ending that evokes both the wonder and pathos of the romantic imagination:

At the enchanted metropolitan twilight I felt a haunting loneliness sometimes, and felt it in others--*poor young clerks who loitered in front of the windows waiting until it was time for a solitary restaurant meal--young clerks in the dusk, wasting the most poignant moment of night and life.*(p. 62, emphasis added)

In these sentence endings is gathered the emotional excitement that accumulates around ambition, money, romantic love, the ripeness of the moment, and the longings and commotion they generate.

The sentence's residual momentum, or surplus, or even exorbitance, can carry across the sentence boundary, producing a variant on the appositional structure: the sentence fragment. Here Nick reflects on Gatsby's statement that Daisy's voice is "full of money" (a statement that might have just as easily thrown things into a more cynical mood):

It was full of money--that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it. ... High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl. ...(p. 127, ellipses in original)

The double appositional construction--"the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it" in apposition to "the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it"--here is perhaps itself inexhaustible, endlessly responding to itself: ellipsis points signify the sentence's resistance to closure, suggesting that the sentence (like the dream) has no conclusion, once this particular syntactic resource and these wordings of romance are in play (all of which seem to enable Nick to beg the question raised by the first part of the sentence--the hard fact of Daisy's wealth, a sturdy economic actuality). The abundance of this appositional surplus spills over the receding sentence boundary, its momentum sufficient to begin a new story, in a syntactic fragment, itself partly appositional, that floats free to gesture to romance in its purest form, the fairy tale of the hero striving and attaining, sights set on the transformative goal: "High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl."<sup>12</sup> Such sentence-ending elaborations summon a virtual world of romance and possibility to attend the characters' actions and the plot's episodes, but they reveal at the same time that the myth of culture at work in the narrative is one that affirms a deeply conservative view of America--an ideology of class and property, of racial hierarchy, of women as possessions. In his reflection on Daisy's voice then, and in numerous sentences where a sharp-eyed view of events gives way to the romance of self-propogating invention, we see that Nick is both "repelled" and "enchanted" (p. 40) by Gatsby's America, that his style of speaking registers two views simultaneously.

## II

That way of speaking directs us to the complexities of Fitzgerald's intention and style. In his ironic rendering of Gatsby as romance hero, Nick would appear highly critical of capitalist aspiration, but the language of this ironic narration reveals that he can be as conservative and elitist as the myths he would discredit. The tension between the naive and ironic aspects of the romance mode, between what Nick describes as Gatsby's "appalling sentimentality" (p. 118) and his own "incredulous laughter" (p. 170), would seem to describe the source of the novel's critical element.<sup>13</sup> But a careful examination of the language of the text reveals that Nick's irony does not always undercut the American Dream upon which Gatsby's fantastic world is founded; rather it locates Nick with the privileged denizens of the moneyed class and in a position to detach himself and look from a distance on the "foul dust" that gathers in Gatsby's wake.

Nick's ironic stance is most prominent in his representation of others' speech, as he works through the linguistic resources available for such representation, and especially as he does so on those occasions when the domains of romantic possibility and suggestion have turned sour: when he has ventured too far into the actual world occupied by Gatsby and Daisy, when the voices of others rise and collide, when he portrays himself at the afternoon get-together in Myrtle's apartment, or in Meyer Wolfsheim's company,

or lingering until the end of one of Gatsby's gaudy parties.

While the wordings of naive romance evoke the ambition of the individual, the hero reconnoitering the boundaries of aspiration and seeking position and recognition within their circumference, an ironic version of the same story deflects the romantic trajectory by making audible the dissonance of the social order. Nick has an ear for these dissonances, the words and accents of daily usage, and the sociohistorical stratifications they embody. He renders these words and accents through a range of means that syntax offers for the expression in a single sentence of many voices at once: through alterations between direct and indirect reported speech; between reported speech and the naming of the speech act; between reported speech and speech simply absorbed into the narrative utterance, detectable only through what Bakhtin calls "intonational quotation marks" (p. 14, and *passim*). In every instance the sentence offers ways of entertaining the ghosts of other sentences. In its ironic dimension, cultivating the discrepancy between what is said and what is intended, ***The Great Gatsby*** renders not the attainment of the individual, nor the collective unity of "the republic" (***Gatsby***, p. 189), but "all the contradictory multiplicity of an epoch" (Bakhtin, p. 156), language saturated with the conditions of the historical era--"even of the hour" (Bakhtin, p. 263)--and with the rankings and calibrations of the social order: the "multiplicity of social voices and [the] wide

variety of their links and interrelationships" (p. 263). Bakhtin observes (especially pp. 68-69, 76, 296) that the novelist's way of incorporating speech artefacts into narrative marks their degrees of solidarity with or distance from the narrator's point of view. In moments when Nick comes into intimate contact with brute matters, he practices speech habits of distancing, and his feeling of superiority and attitude of reserve become apparent in the differentials between the formality of his own words and the words he reports or reproduces. In the following sentence, Nick finds a delicate, arm's-length way of saying that the people in Myrtle's apartment were rapidly getting drunk: "The bottle of whiskey--a second one--was now in constant demand by all present, excepting Catherine, who 'felt just good on nothing at all'" (p. 39). Some wordings here are Nick's: "a second one" indicates his measure of excess consumption; "in constant demand by all present" converts the loud, indulgent talk of the partyers to a formal register that names that aggregate speech act as *demand*. Then, in the same sentence, words appear that are not Nick's at all, and are isolated by quotation marks: Catherine "'felt just as good on nothing at all.'" This construction tells us more than just that Catherine does not drink. As artefacts, her words come with "conditions attached" (Bakhtin, p. 75); they are words that have been attracted, as Bakhtin says, into the "orbits of certain social groups" (p. 290); words that are the alien language, their alien status being, as Bakhtin also says (pp. 278, 287), what produces art that is *not* "poetic" (or lyrical), but novelistic. Nick's

way of handling Catherine's words, exposing them as artefacts of a lower social class, as not *his* way of speaking, executes his social distance from the figures he is closeted with, asserts his attitude of superiority.

As the paragraph continues, Nick reports on the partyers' plans for a meal "Tom rang for the janitor and sent him for some celebrated sandwiches that were a complete supper in themselves" (pp. 39-40)--and similarly manipulates the distance between himself and the cohort of drinkers. He tells us that the sandwiches are "celebrated"; the term at once represents a flow of talk about the sandwiches and concentrates it into a speech act the name of which comes, ironically, from a register more formal than that from which the talk itself issued. (The ironic discrepancy in speech registers could be seen as projected into the setting itself, for Tom's mistress's cramped apartment contains furniture "tapestried" with "scenes of ladies swinging in the gardens of Versailles" [p. 33].) But the relative clause that concludes the sentence appropriates the original register by identifying the sandwiches as a "complete supper in themselves," and giving a more commonplace account of the sandwiches and their advocates. In these two sentences, the narrative voice traverses the social order. Nick's formal wordings elevate him above what is a sordid scene--a drunken, adulterous, and eventually violent afternoon--while his appropriation of the language indigenous to the locale, to the eating, drinking and sexual behaviors of "certain social groups"

in New York in the 1920s, imprints that alien experience in his own sentences.

Nick finds himself in such circumstances again at the end of one of Gatsby's parties. Then he calls the drunkenness a "reluctance to go home" (p. 56). Translating local arguments, he describes the evening as "rent assunder by *dissension*" (emphasis added), and the complaining of the women in raised voices as "*sympathizing* with each other" (emphasis added), in each case containing disorderly speech in elevated names of speech acts. There follows a passage whereby Nick allows us to hear the women directly, just as he previously allowed us to hear words directly from Catherine's mouth:

"Whenever he sees I'm having a good time he wants to go home." "Never heard anything so selfish in my life." "We're always the first ones to leave." (p. 56)

Nick gives the gist of their conversation in a form of indirect reported speech as "the wives' agreement that such malevolence was beyond credibility" (p. 57). By abstracting the women's speech and introducing it in the context of Nick's abstract, educated and literary<sup>14</sup> speech, the narrative schematizes the ironic discrepancy between the word and its setting. From the social information concentrated in the women's direct speech, we know that they are not the kind of people who would say: "I am reluctant to go home"; "I sympathize with you"; "this malevolence is beyond credibility." Nick *is* the kind of person who talks this

way, and, doing so, he reserves his advantage, imposing another speech stratum on the sociolect of others, but still leaving that sociolect to show through.

When the evening deteriorates into total confusion and disorder and Nick joins the crowd around the car wreck, he similarly distances himself with ironic wordings: "The sharp jut of a wall accounted for the detachment of the wheel which was now getting considerable attention from half a dozen curious chauffeurs" (p. 58). Now the ironic wordings achieve a conspicuous effect that perhaps has been immanent all along--an effect of high politeness. Buried in this formal statement is an account of drunk driving--somebody drove into a wall. But the formality politely suppresses agency, and very elaborately, at the cost of some linguistic effort expended to assign active-voice subject position to a non-agent ("jut of a wall") and to nominalize the only trace of the event itself (*detach* > "detachment"), and thus eliminate the grammatical necessity of a doer of the action.<sup>15</sup> The high politeness--distancing and ironic--of this account of drunk driving is later supported by Nick's specialty, indirect speech reporting gist, the gist emanating from the speech of a social class distinct from the class of people excited by the accident. "At least half a dozen men, some of them little better off than he was, explained to [the driver] that wheel and car were no longer joined by any physical bond" (p. 60). We know that men who were "little better off" than the driver would not say "wheel and car [are] no longer joined by any physical bond." This refined gist

measures the long social distance that separates Nick from the scene in which he is involved.

Especially at moments like this, when the world of romance has left him stranded in ugly confusion, Nick works most rigorously on capturing and transforming the speech of others. In so doing he asserts his social distance and superiority not only from working class people like the contemptuous butler (p. 119) or the maid that spits (p. 94), but from the fashionable society of party-goers that collect around Gatsby. By their names they are identified as the *nouveau-riche* and he stands with Gatsby, apart from them, at a distance. But at these moments, the heteroglot voices of a turbulent, unceasingly transient, contradictory social order persist in his ears. Rumor and reputation resound; notoriety and slander amplify the publicity of the newsstands; medleys of popular lyrics play over and over, and even sandwiches are "celebrated." Speech seethes with forces that Nick most acutely reports by naming a pathological speech act that echoes compulsively:

There was the boom of a bass drum, and the voice of the orchestra leader rang out suddenly above the *echolalia* of the garden.(p. 54, emphasis added)

The utterance of the age--echolalia, dense with the disturbed sound of the historical moment--this is what Nick flees from at the end of the novel, the El Greco nightmare of history,<sup>16</sup> not the romantic dream of the king's daughter, "gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor" (p. 157). In turn

we too are invited--again by the style--to make a judgment, to see Nick from a distance, recognizing the political limits of his elitist stance while valuing his capacity to see and hear, and to report on the world around him, with such acuity.

### **III**

Thus far we have examined the elaborate sentence endings which poeticize Gatsby's dream--the American myth of belonging through wealth--and we have considered Nick's ironic voice, the conservative, restraining expressions that reveal his disapproving fastidiousness and sometimes superior attitude. But beyond the voices of his social habitat, and even his refined, ironic translations of them, Nick attends to another order of experience, one that is stable, profound, original, timeless. When Nick tells his story he has returned home to the Middle West where he "wants the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever" (p. 6). In this light of return we shall consider yet another feature of style that complicates our estimate of Nick and his judgment of the world around him.

At the beginning of his story, Nick tells us of his unusually close relationship to his father and conveys a certain pride in the Carraway clan, said to be "descended from the Dukes of Buccleuch" (p. 7). He also turns over in his mind a piece of advice from his father: "Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone ... remember that all the people in this world haven't had

the advantages that you've had" (p. 5). Nick amplifies this counsel in a snobbish generalization, claiming that "a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth" (p. 6). Mr. Carraway's homily, his word of caution, has made a strong impression on his son. And it seems that it is the form as much as the content of the homily that impresses Nick, for, although his amplification somewhat distorts his father's intention, his speech habits can often exactly preserve the voice of the father. Despite his relative youth and his taste for partying, Nick makes a number of similar generalizations about life:

There is no confusion like the confusion of a simple mind.(p. 131)No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart.(p. 101)There [is] no difference between men, in intelligence or race, so profound as the difference between the sick and the well.(p. 131)

In linguistic terms such statements are maxims, that is, proverbial generalizations about human nature and human experience drawn from long reflection on the order of things. Occasionally they occur in ***The Great Gatsby*** as independent propositions, but more frequently they are imbedded in longer sentences, sometimes compressed into referring expressions as when Nick says that he is going to become "that most limited of all specialists, the 'well-rounded' man." Insisting on the wisdom of this paradoxical observation, he continues to generalize, adding: "This isn't just an epigram--life is much more successfully looked at from

a single window, after all" (pp. 8-9). Such statements and expressions are not only general in reference ("most," "a man," "life"), they have no specific time reference, their truth being neither particular nor contingent. They are somehow above, or beside, the narrative order of events and establish in the text the speaker's recourse to an order of permanent values beyond the resounding echolalia and even its ironic representation.

Maxims also convey a speaker's claim to knowledge, his or her access to established authority and steady truths, and recognizing this, Aristotle said that while maxims were an effective tool for orators, young speakers should not use them.<sup>17</sup> Aristotle's advice acknowledges an incompatibility between lack of experience and wise sayings, yet Nick is very prone to thinking in maxims, despite his youth and his resolve to stay all judgments. Their incongruence draws our attention to that very divided nature of the novel's narrator who on the one hand is a heedless party-goer, imagining glamorous encounters with women in darkened doorways, but on the other hand is an apprentice in the banking and bond business and a judicious observer of human behavior. Nick describes this doubleness when he says of himself at the squalid party in Myrtle Wilson's apartment: "I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life" (p. 40). The voice of the maxim, grounded in paternal authority and wisdom, is a regulating device for Nick--solemn, stable, even

magisterial--negotiating the extravagance and moral confusion of West Egg and New York, those "riotous excursions" to which he is so irresistibly drawn. For example, when trying to understand Jordan Baker's behavior early in their relationship, Nick observes that "most affectations conceal something eventually, even though they don't in the beginning" (p. 962). And reflecting on the rumor that she has cheated in a major golf tournament, he makes the sexist claim that "Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply" (p. 63). Nick most often speaks in this voice when under pressure; he says "I am slow thinking and full of interior rules that act as brakes on my desires" (pp. 63-64). The posture of the maxims, distributed in the text beyond particular sentences and situations, signals for the reader something regressive in Nick's character, which in turn is at work in the shaping of his narrative.

An examination of style in ***The Great Gatsby*** reveals strata of social and political attitudes so complex that we are perhaps no longer surprised that on the one hand Nick satirizes Tom Buchanan and his class by having him quote admiringly from the racist writer, Lothrop Stoddard ("The Rise of the Coloured Empires' by this man Goddard" gives "scientific" evidence that "Civilization's going to pieces," says Tom [p. 17]), while on the other hand, in the novel's famous last scene, Nick tells us in romantic wordings of a Long Island that flowered once for Dutch sailor's eyes--"a fresh, green breast of the new world" (p. 189)--a pastoral and

Nordic vision of America's origins that echoes directly Stoddard's ideal. Such contradictions or conflicting motivations are grounds for the interpretive perplexities that Nick's story arouses. While readers have long recognized that Nick is critical of the American scenes he describes, the focus and extent of his criticism continue to confound, as readers estimate Nick's position in the social configurations of the age: where has Fitzgerald located him? Where do Nick's interests lie?

Even as Nick's story defies the romance of wealth and status, and shows its sordid actuality, that core myth of American culture still excites a stylistic homage that sympathizes with Gatsby's aspirations. Nick can imagine the American romance; he recognizes its compelling song--a naive theme of folk consciousness, at once vulnerable and resistant to criticism. Nick's own career is not motivated by this theme--but he can hear its allure and entertain its enchantments.

Were this the sum of the novel's stylistic resources--exposé balanced by fascination--we might read Nick as a disinterested observer, sensitive to both the decadence of the age and its heady momentum, allowing each their weight. But another salient feature of his story-telling voice--his ironic representation of others' voices--begins to situate his interests, and thereby limit the scope of his critical vision. The dialogic ironies of speech locate Nick in a socially elevated position, this trick of rank or hierarchy deriving from his acute sense of social differentials--conditions that make

it impossible for the naive (or folk) hero to ever really transform himself, for he will always bear the marks of his humble origins. This order of social observation secures an elite point of view, and indemnifies privileged interests.

Invoking an appreciation of social rank, these ironic gestures complicate the critical attitude of the narrative. But they might only hint at some confusion of critical intent--were it not for the voice of maxim and authority that pervades the narrative. While this voice could seem innocent or disinterested--it consults timeless principles to evaluate people's behavior--Fitzgerald shows, in his arrangements for Nick's storytelling, that this sober voice itself issues from an identifiable position in the social-order: Nick's well-placed family. Near the myth of rags-to-riches and the self-made man, endlessly replicating itself in the material imagination, there is another myth--equally conservative but more covert: the myth of a distinguished class aloof from the strivings of the marketplace, its own "rags" phase long forgotten and its riches converted to moral authority. As Fitzgerald represents it, Nick's position in the social order is not one from which visions of reform are likely to develop. In fact, social change is clearly problematic from this point of view--where change incurs consternation, and where there is more of an inclination towards restoration than towards reform.

These circumstances are embodied in Nick's voice; it is Nick's voice that reveals complications of interest that

are perhaps inherent in certain traditions of American cultural criticism. In other words, style in ***The Great Gatsby*** is not a motionless, unitary condition, or object of afterthought, but is substance itself, incessantly shifting, forming, and engendering the novel's political and psychological complexity.

### **Source Citation**

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**Discussion questions** (from The National Endowment for the Arts, The Big Read:

<http://www.neabigread.org/books/greatgatsby/ggatsby09.php>)

- 1.The novel's action occurs in 1922 between June and September. How does Nick's non-chronological narration shape your response to the events surrounding the mystery of Jay Gatsby?
- 2.Nick believes he is an honest, non-judgemental narrator. Do you agree?
- 3.Gatsby believes that the past can be repeated. Is he right?

4. Why does Daisy sob into the "thick folds" of Gatsby's beautiful shirts?
5. What do the faded eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg symbolize? Is there a connection between this billboard and the green light at the end of Daisy's dock?
6. Perhaps the novel's climax occurs when Gatsby confronts Tom in New York. Did Daisy's ultimate choice surprise you? Is it consistent with her character?
7. Do you agree with Nick's final assertion that Gatsby is "worth the whole damn bunch put together"? Why or why not?
8. How does Fitzgerald foreshadow the tragedies at the end?
9. Does the novel critique or uphold the values of the Jazz Age and the fears of the Lost Generation?
10. Fitzgerald wrote, "You don't write because you want to say something, you write because you have something to say." What did he have to say in Gatsby?

11. Fitzgerald scholar Matthew J. Bruccoli claims: "The Great Gatsby does not proclaim the nobility of the human spirit; it is not politically correct; it does not reveal how to solve the problems of life; it delivers no fashionable or comforting messages. It is just a masterpiece." Do you agree?

## **Multimedia**

"The Great Gatsby" (Filmed 1974)

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1305234>

"The Great Gatsby" (Filmed 2000)

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1303067>

## **Read alike** (*NoveList*)

Russell Banks, *The Reserve* (2008)

Amy Ephron, *One Sunday morning* (2005)

Ernest Hemingway, *In Our Time* (1925)

John O'Hara, *Appointment in Samarra*, (1934)

Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (1905)

## **Activity**

Set the mood for the group's meeting by listening to jazz music that was popular in the 1920's. Suggestions: Louis Armstrong, Fletcher Henderson, Cab Calloway, and Duke Ellington. Works by each of those four

musicians are available at the library as well as many others!



*Ann Arbor District Library*