

Early in the novel, Nick says of Gatsby that he “turned out all right at the end.” (2) Later, however, after he tells Gatsby “You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together” (154) he abruptly calls this “the only compliment I ever gave him because I disapproved of him from beginning to end.” What does this curiously ambivalent admiration for Gatsby tell us about Nick, and especially about his relation to Gatsby’s “incorruptible dream?”

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Nick is essentially the polar opposite of Gatsby; Nick is a staunch realist, while Gatsby is a dreamer. Nick has a great deal of experience with dreamers, being constantly sought by “wild, unknown men,” who lay their “secret griefs” and “intimate revelations” (1) upon him without any provocation. But Nick himself is without their passions. Gatsby is brought to West Egg by his “incorruptible dream” (154) of being with Daisy, of sharing her “pleasant” world “redolent of orchids... and orchestras” (151). In contrast, Nick migrates to West Egg to make his way in the bond business simply because everyone he knows is in the bond business. It is the expected occupation of the young, privileged graduate and it will provide the support and security he desires. While Gatsby’s strongest memory is of a moment when his eyes were opened to thrilling possibilities, when a new and brighter future was presented to him, Nick’s strongest memory is of being wholly comfortable in the present: of a warm sense of belonging as he “melted indistinguishably” (176) into his motherly Midwest home. Because of this strong fundamental difference between Nick and Gatsby, Nick essentially “disapprove[s] of him from beginning to end.” (1 54) But by the end of his experience in West Egg, Nick at least comes to an understanding of Gatsby’s dream and begins to appreciate its beguiling power.

When Nick meets Gatsby and discovers the longing that animates him, Nick is no longer content to lead his passionless, unambitious life. Though Nick finds sentimentality like Gatsby’s “appalling” (111) in theory, he cannot help but be seduced by the beauty of Gatsby’s feelings, by the depth of his longing for a sliver of the past. Nick tries to capture a little of the sensation Gatsby experienced with Daisy, to have a “girl whose disembodied face float[s] along the dark cornices and blinding signs” (go), through his relationship with the “clean, hard, limited” (79) Jordan Baker, a poor imitation of the lovely and fresh Daisy. Nick searches his past for a moment when he, like Gatsby, “gulped down the incomparable milk of wonder” (110). But what to Gatsby is so strong and palpable is only a “fragment of lost words that [he] had heard somewhere a long time ago” (111) to Nick. Nick, “a little complacent from growing up in the Carraway house” (176) has never experienced these sensations for himself and might be incapable of doing so.

Nick believes Gatsby’s longing for missed opportunities, though attractive, is ultimately futile because “You can’t repeat the past” (110). After his “riotous excursion” (2) into the human heart with Gatsby, Nick wants to be free forever of the romanticism that seduced him. He wants everyone to be “in uniform,” a driven, practical career person like he was, and “at moral attention forever” (2). If our dreams can lead us to the life that Gatsby lived, a sham life of crime, then Nick wants no part of the “abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men” (2).

At the same time, Nick loathes the alternative to Gatsby: the completely satisfied, like Tom Buchanan. They are “careless people” (179) with no lofty ideals, no goals beyond self-gratification. They can evade responsibility and care by retreating into their “rich house” (149). Nick does fundamentally believe that Gatsby is “worth the whole damn bunch put together” (154). And after Gatsby is gone, Nick finally understands the “transitory enchanted moment”

(180) that men like Gatsby seek. He looks out at the dark, unknown possibilities that greeted the Dutch settlers and have animated every American since: the promise of the “orgastic future” (180). Seeing the mysterious, tantalizing darkness, Nick allows himself to think like Gatsby, to imagine that if he were to “run faster... stretch out [his] arms farther ... one fine morning” (180) the darkness would recede and grant him that moment of wonder of which men have dreamt for ages. But Nick remains a realist to the end, incapable of fully accepting Gatsby, because he knows our efforts are futile and that no matter how hard we paddle, we sail “against the current” in a ceaseless effort to attain the unattainable “past” (180).