

*We see all the action of The Great Gatsby from the perspective of one character whose narration seems to be shaped by his own values and temperament. What is Nick Carraway like, what does he value, and how do his character and his values matter to our understanding of the action of the novel?*

## **Rina Wolok** **Nick's Nature and Nurture**

In his timeless classic, *The Great Gatsby*, in order to give readers an unobstructed view of 1920s America, F. Scott Fitzgerald fashions Nick Carraway, an unexciting, highly educated and analytical newcomer to the east coast. At the beginning of the novel, Nick finds himself in Long Island as transformed by the Jazz Age, which he soon discovers to be an alienating backdrop for the lives of its residents. The Jazz Age replaced real life with the pretense of joy and vitality, sapping out genuine emotion in favor of the artificial. Nick proves an ideal narrator for *The Great Gatsby*, because his dutifully moral perceptions lay strong ground for the readers' understanding of a corrupt period, as do his analytical insights.

Nick is a product of his upbringing. He considers himself to have "morals," but in fact, for the most part, he thinks the way he has been taught to think. The result is that Nick sometimes falls short, in readers' modern-day perceptions, of what have appeared to be his high standards and strong values. For example, Nick says: "I have been drunk just twice in my life," implying strong morals (29). However, Nick is prejudiced, later making comments such as: "Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply," and referring to his household help as "my Finn" (58, 83). Nick is a product of his time, his home, his family and his education. After having internalized such an array of influences, Nick has become nervous and awkward, determined to hold himself to the standards he has learned, which differ greatly from the values of his neighbors on Long Island Sound.

Nick is never fully enthusiastic about Eastern life, which causes him to discuss it from a more removed perspective, with constant reminders that he is an outsider. Nick is an anthropologist traversing a foreign environment and dissecting it with keen interest as well as repulsion. Nick's high level of education, as well as his perceptive nature, lead him to develop insightful ideas about the people and the culture that surround him. Many of the comments that Nick makes as casual asides prove him to be deeply observant and clever in his cultural analysis. Nick refers to "an urban taste for the concrete," and "that resourcefulness of movement that is so peculiarly American" (49,64). References such as these call interesting cultural tidbits into focus, but also cause the novel to take on the air of an analytical essay, removing readers somewhat from the action, while simultaneously giving them an increased understanding of the action.

Nick is constantly making judgments and associations that spring from his own education. Sometimes his judgments, based on his own intellectual viewpoint, seem harsh when he is dealing with an emotional, human situation. For example, when Tom Buchanan first starts to believe that he is truly alone in the world, Nick describes this revelation with unsympathetic arrogance, saying, "There is no confusion like the confusion of a simple mind" (125). Nick also uses his education as a security blanket, an opportunity to retreat when he needs some emotional removal. When Nick needs to get away from his painfully awkward tea party with Daisy Buchanan and Gatsby, he runs off to stare at Gatsby's house, "like Kant at his church steeple, for half an hour" (88). In this distant connection to Kant (who, incidentally, also thought one should turn to morality out of a sense of duty, quite like Nick), Nick finds himself not alone. When

readers see from Nick's intellectual perspective, the perspective of a lonely bystander, it becomes clear that the action in the novel cannot fully include a character such as Nick, who will always be lonely in such a setting, as he himself notes, referring to "the promise of a decade of loneliness" on his birthday (135).

Still, though he is distant to some extent, and although he refers to Gatsby's "appalling sentimentality," it is also evident that Nick appreciates genuine emotion, so rarely expressed in his corner of the country during the Jazz Age (111). Unlike the ways of other men whom Nick has known, Gatsby's way of expressing his secret is not "plagiaristic," nor is it "marred by obvious suppressions" (6). Gatsby cannot disguise his primitive sense of wonder when he sees signs of Daisy, nor would he necessarily want to if he could. More than simply endearing, Gatsby's awe is distinctly genuine, and that's why Nick is drawn to it. Nick points out when he sees emotion artificially expressed, causing the reader to regard the emotional action in the novel with the eye of a skeptic. Nick points out that Daisy is "offended" when she sees true lovers kissing, "and inarguably, because it wasn't a gesture but an emotion" (107). Daisy, one of the least genuine characters in the novel, cannot stand anything but the artificial.

Nick's character and values are all too human, although he does attempt to hold himself to what he considers the highest of standards. "I am...full of interior rules," Nick states, "that act as brakes on my desires" (58). However, the modern reader will see Nick's moral flaws as well, proving that this narrator, while perceptive, is not perfectly thorough in his self-discovery. Nick's intellectual tilt helps him to develop insightful ideas about the other characters and the cultural setting, while also tending to remove him emotionally from the scene, thereby removing the readers, who see through his eyes, from the action.