

AQA English Literature A-level

The Great Gatsby: Character Profiles Nick Carraway

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NICK - THE NARRATOR

INTRODUCTION/ OVERVIEW

Nick is the **quiet, reflective** and **subdued** narrator of *The Great Gatsby*. Nick is from Minnesota and grew up in a prominent family from Chicago. His family takes great **pride** in calling themselves the Dukes of Buccleuch, despite making their money in the hardware business. He went to Yale and fought in World War I. In 1922, he traveled to New York to learn the Bond Business. He is Gatsby's neighbour in West Egg. He is not **endowed** with the same wealth and status as the Buchanans and his house is described as being a **"small eyesore"**. Nick is a **flawed** and **unreliable intradiegetic narrator**. He is **frank** with the reader and draws his attention to both his apparent virtues and flaws, perhaps hoping through his frankness to **win the reader's confidence** in his way of viewing the events he narrates.

Through Nick, we don't just get insight into Gatsby and other character's stories but also the ways in which he understands the word **Great** in *The Great Gatsby*. In an instance of **foreshadowing**, early in the novel, Nick states: **"Gatsby turned out alright in the end"** (Chapter 1). These perpetual comments and **reflections** from him ignite a **curiosity** from the reader about the lives of the other characters where they are able to use Nick's **moral judgements** of them to weigh in with their own perspectives of the morality of the characters. Nick acts as a guide through the novel and the **complexity** of his narration, his simultaneous **reliability** and **unreliability** make him a modernist narrator.

NICK AS THE NARRATOR

Nick is a **reluctant participant** who is simultaneously **attached** and **detached** from the **dominant action**. He is both an **outsider** and a **participating party** in the novel's events. This paradox is expressed at the end of Chapter 2 in Tom and Myrtle's apartment where he says: **"I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life"**. Due to this, Nick has been viewed as both the **reliable** and **unreliable narrator**.

Nick is an **intradiegetic narrator**. This means that he is a narrator who is inside the narrative. He shifts between first person and (**homodiegetic**) and third person (**heterodiegetic**) narration, recalling what Gatsby has confided in him. In this way, he narrates the stories of other's lives but at the same time **positions** himself within them. Nevertheless, he **never admits to being the instigator of any action** in the novel - it is the other characters who act, who decide things; he is simply with them. This limited account of his action may also cause the reader to doubt the trustworthiness of his narrator.



NICK'S CHARACTERISTICS

Tolerant

Nick begins the story with a **recollection** of his father's advice and says **"I am inclined to reserve all judgements"**. His tolerance has made him a confidant to some and a **victim** to others. He further emphasises his tolerant nature by stating: **"Whenever you feel like criticizing any one...just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had."** Nick's tolerance or propensity to reserve judgment can be attested to by the fact that it is only after events have reached their **tragic denouement** that he decides to extricate himself from corrupt, amoral East Egg society. Until then he continues to observe and mingle with characters he paints as unpleasant: **vulgar, vacuous or domineering**. Perhaps he thinks he is reserving judgment by remaining in their company. It may alternatively be interpreted as a lack of morality.

Honest and Trustworthy (Or Not?)

On the first page of the novel, Nick states that he **"was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men. Most of the confidences were unsought—frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation, or a hostile levity when I realized by some unmistakable sign that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon"** (Chapter 1)

This quote is **suggestive** of Nick's **tolerance** that allows him to become the **confidant** of a lot of people. Many characters confide in him. When characters openly and comfortably tell their stories to him, he becomes the means through which we can learn about other characters in the novel. Daisy opens up to him and says: **"I've had a very bad time, Nick, and I'm pretty cynical about everything"**. Myrtle pulls up a chair so close to him she can feel her warm breath and tells him about her first meeting with Tom. Nick also becomes the **central confidant** of both Gatsby and Tom who **steer** the conflict in the novel.

Nick's admission that he feigns sleep when confidence seem to be on the horizon is another instance of foreshadowing; he **obliquely** reveals early on that he has become **world-weary** and now avoids this role. Being the confidant of so many characters is an **immense responsibility** and by avoiding certain connections early on, Nick can avoid the **awkward** situations where he is caught in the middle.

Nick establishes honesty as his at the end of Chapter 3: **"Everyone suspects himself of at least one of the cardinal virtues, and this is mine: I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known"**. But perhaps Nick has a different definition of honesty? After all, he continues to spend time with morally questionable characters and enables Gatsby's affair with Daisy while continuing to liaise with Tom; it seems he lies both to himself and others. Fitzgerald **primes** the reader to question Nick's honesty through his **choice of language**. **"Suspect"** (as opposed to "believe") encourages the reader to call into question the **veracity** of his statement;



to suspect implies **a degree of uncertainty** and the verb's **negative connotations** subtly undermine his assertion of virtue.

Other events and admissions may lead the reader to question his honesty or trustworthiness. He denies his engagement to a girl in the Mid West, is challenged by Jordan after the demise of their relationship “**I thought you were an honest, straightforward person**” on grounds that he does not disclose, and praises Catherine for lying to a judge after Gatsby's death. While these **instances of dishonesty are rare**, a reader may **retroactively** question Nick's version of events as a result.

Quiet and Reflective

The story is told **retrospectively**. This may diminish the **accuracy** of the events in the novel; after two years he may experience lapses or distortions of memory which may lead him to lead out or misreport events or dialogue. On the other hand, it also enables him to **reflect critically** on the events and characters in a way that he may not have been able to do in the heat of the moment. The distance between the events and their narration mean Nick's conception of the characters is **stable** throughout the novel, whereas they may have changed during the course of the events. Nick describes Gatsby throughout the novel with a mixture of “**scorn**” and admiration and this gives us a sense of Nick's **objectivity** or of the holistic nature of his appraisal of Gatsby's character, which in turn lends him an **authority** which he might not otherwise possess, were his reaction to Gatsby constantly in flux.

Certain moments lead into the reflective **commentaries** happening inside Nick's head. In a novel with **constant action**, Nick offers pauses which inspire **critical reflection** and assist the motivations of Fitzgerald to use the story as **social commentary**. This essentially places Nick as Fitzgerald's **mouthpiece** to the readers, as he offers opinions **unconventional** of the American Twenties, or even displays a certain sense of **wokeness**.

Self-Aware and Cautious

Though Nick's voice is **subdued**, he appears to lack assurance sometimes. His inability to speak **authoritatively** is not because he is **indifferent** to the events that play out before him but because he is **aware** of his own **physical limits** to **rectify** the behaviour of those that surround him. His **detachment** is not a lack of awareness as he says: “**a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth**” and does hold the actions of the characters to a **high moral standard**. Although this colours his narrations and commentary with **bias**, he is redeemed by the fact that his criticisms are driven by a **moral objective**. He says: “**Conduct may be founded on the hard rock or on the wet marshes, but after a certain point I don't care what it's founded on**”. Nick is also an **overt narrator** and also does not claim to be **infallible**. In the early stages of the novel, he encourages the reader to question his **reliability** by saying: “**After boasting this way of my tolerance, I come to the admission that it has a limit**”. Furthermore, he reflects critically on his own narration, for example: “**Reading over**



what I have written so far, I've given the impression that the events of three nights several weeks apart were all that absorbed me" (Chapter 3).

Nick's Birthday and Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is an important technique in the novel. Throughout the novel there are hints of the **tragic** end. The effect of this is that the characters' **fates seem predetermined** and for them, the American Dream is foreclosed on.

When Nick, Tom and Jordan leave New York, Nick suddenly realises it is his birthday. He sees the years ahead as **"a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair"** (Chapter 8). At this moment, Nick becomes aware of his **mortality**. He further states: **"we drove on toward death through the cooling twilight"**. Though this line is a reference to general mortality, it also specifically foreshadow Myrtle's car accident that they discover down the road. The **cataphoric reference** of driving towards Myrtle's death is evidence here as it hints the **mode of murder**.

Thirty is also the age that separates adult **youth** from **mature** adulthood and **freedom** from **responsibility**. Nick is aware of this turning point in his life. He begins to learn not only of the **ephemerality** of life but also the temporary nature of his **chosen** life in New York. The importance of **social responsibility** is also prominent in the passage, as he acknowledges that he cannot be around and **tolerant** to so much **corruption** and **immorality** without becoming **careless** himself, with the **unravelling** of Gatsby's dream to motivate his moral choice to leave this **"rotten"** social circle.

NICK'S UNRELIABILITY

Contradictory and Inconsistent

Though Nick is generally considered to be **honest** and **trustworthy**, he is not always **consistent**. For instance, he is **dishonest** about his relationship back home. His **trustworthiness** is also challenged by Jordan who says: **"I thought you were rather an honest, straightforward person"**. Though Nick does consistently hold others to a **high moral standard** throughout the novel, his **moral standards** are influenced by his **bias** towards the characters. This is particularly apparent with the **regard** he has for Gatsby. He does not **scoff** at Gatsby's affair with Daisy as much as he does with Tom's affair with Myrtle. After Gatsby's death, he **praises** Catherine's character for lying to a judge. These **moral inconsistencies** make Nick's narrations and moral judgements throughout the novel **questionable**.

Sentimental and Biased

Nick's presentation of Gatsby in particular is one that is constantly influenced by his **attachment** to Gatsby. He both **admires** and is **disappointed** by Gatsby. He says that Gatsby is someone **"who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn"** (Chapter 1). Gatsby represents **materialism** and an **obsession** with wealth. Later, during the confrontation between



Gatsby and Tom, he says: "I wanted to get up and slap him on the back. I had one of those renewals of complete faith in him that I'd experienced before". Nick's **bias** towards Gatsby and his growing **admiration** for him, show that his perceptions are **emotionally motivated**. In this way, he presents a **sentimental** and **affectionate** aspect of himself that contrasts with his **emotional distancing** that happens throughout the novel.

With regards to Gatsby, Nick is often critical but this criticism is more than counterbalanced by his admiration for the man. This mixture of **criticism and praise** may lead the reader to believe that Nick's judgement is more **objective** or **balanced** - something that Nick himself encourages, intimating throughout the novel that he has **intimate, unique access** to Gatsby's story and psychology and therefore only he can give an account of Gatsby. Nevertheless, Nick is ultimately **in Gatsby's thrall**, and this is revealed most obviously by the number of parallels Nick draws between Gatsby and Jesus, the son of God. Nick may have fallen in love with Gatsby's **capacity for romanticism** but a feminist reading of the novel may correct this. A feminist critic would indeed argue that Gatsby is deluded, projecting onto Daisy in such a way that she is a mere **cipher**. This view paints Gatsby as deluded and lacking in self-awareness. While we may appreciate the **seductiveness** of Gatsby's romanticism - a seductiveness that is mirrored by the novel's **evocative, gorgeous prose** - we can step outside the box and see it for what it is. Our admiration for Gatsby is diminished and Nick is revealed as wearing rose-coloured spectacles.

Susceptible to Alcohol

Though Nick is one of the more responsible characters and does not care to join the drunken crowds in his **social interactions**, when he is **intoxicated**, he is **susceptible** to its influence. In Chapter 2 specifically, Nick's narrative is **distorted** when he gets drunk at Tom and Myrtle's party in New York. His **incoherence** of the events, depicted by unfinished sentences and **ellipses**, contributes to the reader's own uncertainty of them. He is as confused as Tom, Myrtle, Catherine and the McKees. When Tom breaks Myrtle's nose, his reaction is **non-responsive**; he leaves and observes the "**flickering lights**" of the city.



Nick's References to Lights

Nick constantly references lights, "**the satisfaction that the constant flicker of men and women and machine's gives to the restless eye**", the "**single green light**" and the "**constant flicker**". This **oxymoronic** representation, "**the constant flicker**" alludes to the **instability** of the economic system and the **dreams** that exist within them. The **material world** is as **volatile** as the emotional world, and the very money that supposedly brings stability, also carries with it **immense uncertainty**. This "**constant flicker**" is also a reference to "**We live in the flicker**" by Marlow in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad's narrator and Fitzgerald's narrator are both **historical surveyors** in this: Marlow observes British imperial history and Nick observes American modern history. Though Nick sometimes only **glances**, or **gazes** slightly and not intently, he picks up on **iconography**. He **elucidates** the **realities** of the societies not with images, but with **repetitive symbols**. This is effective to not only highlight the **social realities** but to show how deeply and widely they have **permeated** society. Nick pays a lot of attention to light and colour, and in doing so exposes the **transient, superficial** lives of the modern American society.

THE VALUE OF NICK'S NARRATIVE VOICE

By the end of Chapter 9, Nick's voice **merges** into Fitzgerald's voice. He gives his voice less **authority** and **assurance**. In doing so, he doesn't become **invisible** but makes Fitzgerald's intended messages **visible**. Nick's narration does not just tell a story but provides a social commentary.

Nick's constant movement from **innocence** to experience, from reality to poetry, from **indifference** to empathy is reflective of New York's own lack of **equilibrium** and the **heterogeneous** state of American culture. Nick's narration of events accompanied with critical reflection and commentary are an effective advice to **satirise** the society. Nick's voice presents a **realist** and **modernist lens** from which to view the text. The elements of **realism** (evident in the mundane, descriptive, pastoral happenings that surround him) as well as the elements of **modernism** (evident in the internal monologues that seek to define his role in an industrializing society) work together to **elucidate** the **moral bankruptcy** in post-War America.

Nick participates in the story with subtle action but he **satirizes** the story with constant **reflection** and **mockery**. This makes Nick emerge as a **moral agent** in the novel that is not **infallible**. In this way, although Fitzgerald **critiques** and **mocks** the **loss of morality** in a **materialistic** America, he is also able to **humanize** the experience of those **corrupted** by economic pursuits and **disillusioned** by the promise of the American Dream. This **humanisation** happens through Nick, who is able to accompany his critique with **tolerance**. Though Nick comments on morality - for example, "**Conduct may be founded on the hard rock or the wet marshes, but after a certain point I don't care what it's founded on.**"



(Chapter 1) - he is also aware of the characters' limits of morality. In many ways he presents an **understanding**, if not an excuse, of their **moral failures**.

His voice is **rich** and educated, embodying those who come from old money, but also holds enough **awareness** to distance himself from his **pre-ordained** social group (the likes of the Buchanans). His friendship and later support of Gatsby is not a **solidarity** (because they do not emerge from similar economic circumstances) but an allyship. Nick has a **privileged** voice and he uses it to **redefine** his position with the characters in the novel, not based on tradition but based on their **commitments to morality**. Though he scoffs at Gatsby, he also admires Gatsby's commitment to his dream. The strength of Nick to not defend his social class above all else, is what allows him to become the **intermediary** between two worlds: the real and superficial, the material and emotional and the traditional and modern. By the end of the novel, he does emerge as a kind of **moral philosopher**.

For Nick, love is trust, empowerment and companionship.

NICK'S RELATIONSHIP WITH JORDAN BAKER

Nick meets Jordan when he is invited over to the Buchanans. She is a friend of Daisy's. Their relationship develops the most during Chapters 3 and 4, when they are around each other **frequently** which makes their **situationship** easier, but as the novel progresses, their relationship **dwindles**. Ultimately, Nick's romance with Jordan is **symbolic** of his own **inner conflict**. He is attracted to the thrill of New York but also finds the lifestyle of people there **grotesque**. Jordan is symbolic of both these things.

Nick's first **perception** of Jordan is one that relies heavily on her physical appearance. Not only does he find her attractive, but she also transmits an **aura of class and sophistication**, through her body language and **posture**. In Chapter 1, Nick's immediate physical attraction to her is apparent when he says:

"I enjoyed looking at her. She was a slender, small-breasted girl, with an erect carriage which she accentuated by throwing her body backward at the shoulders like a young cadet. Her grey sun-strained eyes looked back at me with polite reciprocal curiosity out of a wan, charming discontented face. It occurred to me now that I had seen her, or a picture of her, somewhere before."

Nick is only drawn to Jordans' **physical attractiveness** but also what she represents: the **ideal society girl** of the American Twenties, with her **boyish** look. Her **fame** as a young **celebrity** is of importance here as Nick is very aware of her **glamour**. She is also very **unattached** and **candid**. Daisy speaks on her behalf and tries to arrange something between Nick and Jordan saying:



"In fact I think I'll arrange a marriage. Come over often, Nick, and I'll sort of—oh—fling you together. You know—lock you up **accidentally** in linen closets and push you out to sea in a boat, and all that sort of thing" (Chapter 1)

This **flippancy** seems to work well with Nick, whose relationship style seems to be very unattached. There are brief mentions of the woman he has left back home and the woman he dates for a short while from his office. He does not **resist** Daisy's **casual arrangement** of him and Jordan. Perhaps this is because he prefers **casual encounters** or because Jordan represents an **ascension** for Nick in terms of **status**. Even though Nick acts as the **everyman**, Jordan does represent his own **ambitions** to better his class status.

When Nick and Jordan go driving he tells her: "**You're a rotten driver... either you ought to be more careful or you oughtn't to drive at all**" (Chapter 3). When he calls her out for **carelessness** and wishes for her to meet someone as **careless** as herself she says, "**I hate careless people. That's why I like you**" (Chapter 3). Jordan can afford to be this **careless** and Nick is attracted to her **blasé** ability to do this. Note the cataphoric reference to the words Nick later uses to describe East Egg society as a "**rotten crowd**" and "**they were careless people**". It appears that carelessness is a **class marker**; the more privileged are less careful since they can survive the **fallout** of their actions. They do not care whether they put themselves and others in **danger**, hence why Daisy did not even bat an eyelash before letting Gatsby pay the **cost** of her **carelessness**. The **extended metaphor** of careless driving as a stand-in for general carelessness is a recurring symbol for **the lack of social responsibility** displayed by the upper classes in the American Twenties.

In Chapter 4, he considers Jordan to be a "**clean, hard, limited person who dealt in universal skepticism**". As he puts his arm around her he thinks of this phrase: "**There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy and the tired**". Nick is **elated** to be with someone who, through her **careless** attitude, represents those who are the "**pursued**", the category that Nick wishes to embody himself.

However, Nick's admiration of Jordan is not **long lasting**. Nick is both drawn to and **repelled** by Jordan. At the beginning of the novel, Nick notes her "**contemptuous expression**" (Chapter 1) and her "**scornful mouth**" (Chapter 4) but they do not prevent him from "**dr[awing] her up again**" to kiss her. He seems to believe that his **observation of her defects** marks him as a realist. While he admires Gatsby's romanticism, he notes the **solipsistic nature** of his fantasy; Daisy exists for Gatsby as a "**disembodied face**" (Chapter 4). Nick concludes that he "**ha[s] no disembodied face**" to float "**along the dark cornices and blinding signs so [he] dr[aws] up the girl beside [him], tightening [his] arms**". He seems incapable of imagining the possibility of a healthy romance with someone he likes yet does not over-idealise. Perhaps that is the **cynic** in him.

As the the novel progresses, Nick seems to develop a moral compass. He is **appalled** by how Jordan reacts to the car accident and this is reflected in his **aesthetic perception**. When she calls him to tell him that she's leaving Daisy's to go to South Hampton, he describes her voice



as “**harsh and dry**” as opposed to its usual “**fresh and cool**” quality (Chapter 8). This final call ends “**abruptly**” and marks the end of their relationship, which he regards with indifference: “**I don’t know which of us hung up with a sharp click but I know I didn’t care.**”

NICK AND GATSBY

NICK	GATSBY
Nick neither pursues the American Dream nor needs to pursue it; he is relatively wealthy and financially secure.	Gatsby pursues the American Dream although his goal is not wealth for wealth’s sake . His origins are “ penniless ”.
Nick is less wealthy than Gatsby yet more or less accepted by East Egg society.	Gatsby is fantastically rich yet treated with contempt by West Egg society, as his consumption habits and mannerisms mark him out as one of the <i>nouveau riche</i>
Nick makes friends easily, lives quite an ordinary life and seems sane .	Gatsby is alone, mysterious and obsessed .
Nick scrutinises everything and subjects the actions of the novel to his moral scrutiny.	Gatsby has questionable morality and is only influenced by Daisy's impressions of him.

KEY QUOTES

1	<p>“I was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men. Most of the confidences were unsought—frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation, or a hostile levity when I realized by some unmistakable sign that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon.” (Chapter 1)</p> <p>This quote highlights Nick’s role as a confidant and well as foreshadows he regrets for this role. Nick is engaged in an internal conflict of being a trusted listener and a moral actor. This quote is also one of the many instances in the novel that Nick uses the technique of foreshadowing.</p>
2	<p>“High over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I was him too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.” (Chapter 2)</p>



	<p>This quote highlights Nick's social and moral role in the novel. It takes place at the Buchanan's New York apartment where he has recently become aware of the affair between Myrtle and Tom. Nick thinks about what people outside see when they look into the lit-up apartment. He imagines himself in this role. Socially, he has connections to wealthy people but he is not wealthy. He is "within and without" his social role. Morally he is "within and without" too. He internally reflects on the immorality he sees but does not outwardly act against it.</p>
3	<p>"I am one of the few honest people I have ever known." (Chapter 3)</p> <p>This line paradoxically invites the reader to question Nick's honesty and the reliability of his narration. If this trait is mentioned by Nick himself, the reader needs to proceed with his retelling of events with caution. This quote is central to the controversy about the reliability of Nick's narration.</p>
9	<p>"I found myself on Gatsby's side, and alone" (Chapter 9)</p> <p>This quote brings the novel full circle. It is both indicative of Nick's position as narrator as well as his own isolation which he shares with Gatsby throughout the novel. At first, Nick considers Gatsby snobbishly, admitting "Gatsby represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn". While he does not elaborate on this, we can guess he is repelled by Gatsby's ostentatious hedonism (as opposed to the discreet, 'tasteful' hedonism of the 'Old Money' set). However, by the end of the novel he does not view Gatsby with the same disgust as he does other characters. This is primarily due to his admiration for Gatsby's commitment to his dream in the midst of a cynical society interested only in the pleasures of the day. Both Nick and Gatsby exist outside the world of old money despite Nick's blood relations to it. This quote echoes with a similar one in Chapter 1 where Nick says: "Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction". Nick's admiration of Gatsby is what gives the novel the name <i>The Great Gatsby</i>.</p>

