

The Vagueness in *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract

There is a certain vagueness in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The story relies much on implicit language packed with suggested meaning rather than realistic description. And the outlines of the hero Gatsby remain dim throughout the story. Nick as the narrator keeps a distance from the various events in the story despite his physical proximity to the main characters. What's more, Gatsby's pursuit of Daisy is also shrouded in a haze of dream with Daisy as a figure clouded in vagueness. However, the image of Gatsby sticks to reader's heart as Fitzgerald's echo to his indefinable aspirations. And all this vagueness does not plague the reader with the awful ambiguity of perception, but rather seeks to excite the reader and to draw the reader within.

Key words: *The Great Gatsby*; Vagueness; Nick the narrator; Pursuit of Daisy

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INTRODUCTION

In looking at Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, one frequently discerns a certain vagueness: the story is itself deceptively simple with a seemingly flimsy plot which relies much on implicit language rather than realistic description; Gatsby as a character remains dim in his outlines throughout the whole story along with his somehow meretricious and vulgar dream; Gatsby's

pursuit of Daisy is shrouded in a haze of idealization more typical of romantic poetry than of modern fiction; Nick the narrator is acutely observant and accurate in chronicling the stories of the people around him on one hand yet irresponsibly keeps a distance from the various events in the story on the other. Or else, Fitzgerald the author comes to bear the brunt: the language of the book is a rich, complex drawn from a variety of sources such as the biblical and Christian discourse, the modernist prose of T.S.Eliot and James Joyce. "In *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald updates Romanticism for the twentieth century and, true to the modernist demand for high-impact language, packs every sentence with meaning." (Tredell, 2007, p.17) But all this vagueness does not cast agnostic worries or plague the reader with the awful ambiguity of perception. It rather seeks to excite the reader, to draw the reader within, and makes stronger demands on the reader's powers to disentangle Gatsby's indefinable aspirations. It is in this light that *Gatsby* criticism often seems to reveal these vague appearances, to see through and deconstruct for what they truly are.

1. A DIM OUTLINE OF GATSBY IN THE STORY

When the story begins with Nick's own moral censure and his ambivalent comment on Gatsby, a sense of vagueness about Gatsby is created. It starts with a rather abstract, oblique description about Gatsby by introducing him "as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away" (Fitzgerald, 2007, p.6) without even employing adjectives to name his personality. The analogy which likens Gatsby to a seismograph is not helping to visualize Gatsby. And Nick states it in a rather conversational mood by using the conditional sentence in "if...then..." structure without a logic connection. What "an unbroken series of successful gestures" has to do with "something gorgeous about

him”? (ibid) Readers cannot see a full-fledged physical description of Gatsby, and they can easily conjure an impression that Nick is holding back to some degree, and he is not fully committing himself to that description. This depiction at the start of *Gatsby* cultivates that sense of vagueness which cannot be quickly conveyed and grasped.

Besides, Nick’s opening conversation with Gatsby which happens before the two men having been introduced also seems laconic and vague.

“Your face is familiar,” he said, politely. “Weren’t you in the Third Division during the war?”

“Why, yes. I was in the Ninth Machine-gun Battalion.”

“I was in the Seventh Infantry until June nineteen-eighteen. I knew I’d seen you somewhere before.”

We talked for a moment about some wet, gray little villages in France. (Fitzgerald, 2007, p. 48)

What reader knows through their talk is a factual statement about Gatsby’s participation in the war, but the following talk which might reveal more about Gatsby and provide a casual glimpse into one certain aspect of the man is reduced into Nick’s indirect speech. It could be a good touch to fulfill the image of Gatsby by showing the two veterans discussing their war stories. Yet the author again holds back in not mentioning the specific towns they talk about or the events they saw. Gatsby stays silent for most of the novel, speaks evasively or has his word paraphrased through Nick. When it comes to the plot development, there is a large gap in Gatsby’s story between the point where Wolfsheim takes him up and his rising as a generous and hospital party-host. We can only hear Gatsby from the wild rumors circulating about him, “he killed a man”, or “a German spy during the war” without being entitled with a satisfactory clarification even in the end.

Maxwell Perkins, as the one who has read the initial draft of *The Great Gatsby*, wrote to Fitzgerald in his letter:

—Gatsby is somewhat vague. The reader’s eyes can never quite focus upon him, his outlines are dim. Now everything about Gatsby is more or less a mystery, i.e., more or less vague... Couldn’t he be physically described as distinctly as the others, and couldn’t you add one or two characteristics like the use of that phrase “old sport”—not verbal, but physical ones, perhaps. (Perkins, 1950)

Fitzgerald, seemingly stubborn and determined in not giving to Perkins’s suggestion that he should make Gatsby less vague, replies in his letter:

Strange to say, my notion of Gatsby’s vagueness was OK. ... I myself didn’t know what Gatsby looked like or was engaged in.... This is a complicated idea, but I’m sure you’ll understand. ...I know Gatsby better than I know my own child. My first instinct after your letter was to let him go and have Tom Buchanan dominate the book...but Gatsby sticks in my heart. I had him for a while, then lost him, and now I know I have him again. (Turnbull, 1963, p.173)

There couldn’t be a better depiction on an author’s relation to his creation. Fitzgerald sticks to his “vacant”

Gatsby and believes that reader would understand. Fitzgerald is willing to risk confusion to accomplish the very difficult task of making a deliberately shadowy figure the central character of the novel.

2. NICK THE DISTANT NARRATOR

As stated by many critics, the management of point of view, the creation of Nick has been regarded as one of the novel’s great achievements. The book is a narration of a series of events viewed through the eyes of Nick, who as both a narrator and a character involved in the story, is the source of vagueness. With the narrative trickling out in bits and pieces, Nick’s first-person viewpoint allows us to participate in his discovery of desires and dreams of people around him. His physical proximity to the main characters serves him an ideal bonus to observe the story within a short distance. Much of the novel is devoted to Nick’s action of listening and looking and it describes not only the experience he witnesses, but also produces the mood, tone and dimensions that bring the whole story into a unity. The focus of *The Great Gatsby* is sentiments of its narrator as well as the life story. It’s true that all the emotions carrying the tone of the novel are conveyed through Nick’s consciousness, which provides the reader with a higher stand to look into the story. But “the novel has a surface and uncharted depth...Nick does not fully see or understand what he perceives”. (Prigozy, 2009, p.109) At the very first beginning, Nick immediately admits his involvement in the tale and the powerful effect it has had on his life. He is so emotionally immersed in the “riotous” story he tells that there are moments when Nick is not content to stay within the limits of his own perception and perspective and turns a first-person narrator to strive for a panoramic view. When he imagines Gatsby kissing Daisy for the first time, he tells Gatsby’s dreamy aspiration through an omniscient point of view as if he sees through the inward and spiritual condition of Gatsby. Another example falls on the passage where Nick imagines what Gatsby must have felt on the day of his death:

I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn’t believe it would come, and perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. 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. (Fitzgerald, 2007, p.157)

This passage begins with Nick’s speculation: “I have an idea”, “perhaps”. And the next sentence is presented in the conditional mode, “if that was true”, then shifts into a more definite and insistent tone, “he must have felt”. The reader is led slowly but firmly into accepting an omniscient summary: “he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream”. The following sentence is really inviting the reader to

join in Gatsby's perception: an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves, a grotesque rose, the raw sunlight and the scarcely created grass. But what grounds does Nick have for his apparent knowledge of what Gatsby saw and felt? Apparently, the narrator's viewpoint creates a "distance" between the story and its reader, or in Wayne C. Booth's word, "distance" between the author's perception, or the norms of the novel and the perception of the narrator. (Boyle, 1969, p.21) We might presume that he employs a mixture of imagination that stems from his own emotions and sentiments, and inference from his knowledge and experience of Gatsby's situation. And he tries to go beyond this mixture as if it were the authoritative discourse of an omniscient narrator. This reminds us that Gatsby's story is contained in a book, a story that Nick writes with a more evocative and poetic rather than descriptive touch. It should be remembered that Nick is telling his own story as well as Gatsby's. Nick's role in the novel is not a minor involvement. He remains silent and allows Wilson to be "reduced to a man deranged by grief in order that the case might remain in its simplest form." And his silence has an important bearing on the events of the novel, as it results in Gatsby's murder and Wilson's suicide. Nick as an unreliable narrator and his unreliability comes from his compromise on truth. Nick thinks that "all this part of it (meaning the moral corruption of Daisy and Tom and its consequences) seems remote and unessential." (Boyle, 1969, p. 23)

3. DAISY THE HAZY DREAM

Gatsby's feeling for Daisy is also shrouded in a haze of idealization more typical of romantic poetry than of modern fiction. Fitzgerald seems to give a rather blurry description of the love between Gatsby and Daisy from the time of their reunion until Gatsby's death. Gatsby's entire dream and aspiration are built upon the hope to repeat the past, to rekindle the love with Daisy. Daisy therefore is as central to the whole story. It's undeniable that she is beautiful, as one can learn from Jordan's account of their girlhood that Daisy was always the belle of the ball. However, like Gatsby, she is scarcely described and presented in physical terms. Her visual image also seems vague. James M. Mellard notices that Daisy is seen only in metaphysical and static terms in contrast to her counterpart Myrtle in wholly physical and dynamic terms. "Daisy Buchanan, alluring as she may be, is never seen in the harsh material way that Myrtle is, but is seen instead in musical terms." (Mellard, 1966, p.854) Fitzgerald portrays Daisy as a figure clouded in vagueness but also penetrates this vagueness by highlighting her voice. We almost hear her rather than see her in the novel. Daisy's voice throughout the book is made the epitome of her charm. It's her voice, rather than her bodily features that gives her

form which exists primarily in the imagination of Gatsby, Nick and us. On his first visit to Buchanan's house, Nick depicts Daisy's laughter as "an absurd charming little laugh", her voice as "low, thrilling", "it was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down, as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again. . . there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget." (Fitzgerald, 2007, p.13) One might hardly get rid of a question which is simple but fundamentally important: What's so great about Daisy? What kind of girl could possibly inspire such devotion? Yet from this description of her voice, they are easily reminded of the image of siren. Her irresistible voice speaks of everything Gatsby desires. Daisy's voice, musical, enchanting, exhilarating and thrilling represents to Gatsby the attributes of a certain social class. She is a woman evaporated into sound, an ideal, an apparition of success which Gatsby takes for the real thing and is impelled to obtain. Therefore, Daisy's rejection of Gatsby for Tom is not a statement of the intensity of her love, but a statement of the innate insecurities of the dream. This is Fitzgerald's triumph. "Had he dramatized that relationship, he would have been validating a sham." (Samuels, 1966, p.783) Daisy's voice, or rather Gatsby's dream turns out to be a sham, a tragic dream where there could be no fulfillment.

4. GATSBY A DISTINCT ECHO TO THE AMERICAN DREAM

Gatsby is one of those few characters in American fiction, like Huck Finn and Hester Prynne, whose name immediately brings forth a vital emblem of some aspects of human life. Gatsby's dream is linked to the American dream, going back to Benjamin Franklin and the earlier Dutch sailors---to the prehistory of the America itself. However, the American dream, in Fitzgerald's unique voice lacks the inspiration, the sense of fulfillment so evident in the stories of his predecessors. And Gatsby is Fitzgerald's answer to this dream in the post-World War I period known as "the Roaring Twenties." Therefore, Gatsby as a figure clouded in vagueness is not only a technical device to arouse the interest of the reader, but to echo his indefinable aspirations, his exalted notion of life's possibilities. Thus, this dream incarnated in Gatsby becomes ever familiar to the reader. "Although we see little of him and scarcely ever hear him speak, his presence is continually with us; and he exists, as characters in fiction seldom do, as a life force." (Samuels, 1966, p. 787)

In the scene when Gatsby meets Daisy again, Gatsby, a usually physically and emotionally reserved person, becomes vivacious and exudes great liveliness. Fitzgerald gives a detailed description both on his physical and

mental actions. And the reader may know here is the moment Gatsby has been waiting for and building up his life for. His responsiveness to the possibilities of life, which Nick likens to that of a seismograph that registers distant earthquakes, is timeless. Also, in the scene when Nick and Gatsby wait outside the Buchanan house to drive to New York, Daisy's symbolic nature is suggested by Gatsby himself that "her voice is full of money". Gatsby supplies the missing word with unusual conviction, clarity and directness. This is a startling juxtaposition of Daisy's voice and money but Nick gives an immediate and terse assent to this statement: "that was it." Money has long been seen as the central magic in Fitzgerald's scheme. And the American Dream, like Daisy's voice, may be confused with money, but it is ultimately an exhilarating liberty which worships the individual will and erases all social disparities. Nick says he believes the voice is what holds Gatsby most: "with its fluctuating, feverish warmth ... it couldn't be over dreamed ---that voice was a deathless song." (Fitzgerald, 2007, p.95) Daisy's voice is the miraculous equivalent to that Dream, a dream freed from any impediments to make a world responsive to our will, to remake ourselves. As is acutely stated by Weinstein, "To be free from the constraints of proof or evidence, to alter one's identity, to be multiple rather than single, to overcome the laws of time and space and background: such are precisely the virtues of fiction, of the American Dream, and of Jay Gatsby". (Weinstein, 1985, p.27) Out of his tenacity and persistence, Gatsby remains faithful and stubbornly attached to that one idea of woman. His "heightened sensitivity to the promise of life" lies in his denial of life's limitations. His passionate devotion to Daisy could defy time so that the past could be repeated. And in this sense, Gatsby is great for having believed a promise more poignant and precious: the desire and dream can be fulfilled. As Kenner concludes, "it is important, in short, that Gatsby shall be great. It is important because the central myth of the book has to do with appearance made real by sheer will: the oldest American theme of all" (Weinstein, 1985, p. 24). And when this sound is not heard, which is exemplified in the end of the book that no telephone message from Daisy has arrived, indicates the silence of Gatsby's dream.

CONCLUSION

The elusive quality of the novel and the sense of vagueness Fitzgerald is determined to retain can be recognized. However, all this vagueness does not cast agnostic worries or plague the reader with the awful ambiguity of perception. It rather seeks to excite the reader, to draw the reader within, even to persuade the reader to be governed by and acquiesce in the narrator's values, judgments, and enthusiasms. While Fitzgerald keeps Gatsby at a distance and preserves his mystery, he is really inviting the reader to project his own reading of Gatsby, his own reading of his follies and dreams. "The story is powerful as much for what is suggested as for what is told. It leaves the reader in a mood of chastened wonder, in which fact after fact, implication after implication is pondered over, weighed and measured... Mr. Fitzgerald has certainly arrived." (Prigozy, 2009, p.98) What's more, it also makes stronger demands on the reader's powers to infer from the supposedly answered questions in the novel. It is in this light that Gatsby criticism often seems necessary to reveal these vague appearances, to see through and deconstruct for what they truly are.

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