The Fallibility of the First Person-Narrator: The Reader's Role in Deconstructing The Great Gatsby

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Abstract

In his famous *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne C. Booth coined the term "unreliable narrator", a literary device in which the credibility of the narrator is seriously compromised. This unreliability (fallibility) can be attributed to psychological instability, a powerful bias, a lack of knowledge, or even a deliberate attempt to deceive the reader. Fallible narrators are usually first-person narrators. A classic example of this kind of narrator is Nick Carraway, the narrator-protagonist of *The Great Gatsby*, a work of lasting literary value. The reader, in this case, faces the challenge of not only fathoming the possible meanings or readings, but also questioning the reliability of the work's special narrator. Deconstructionist strategies can be used by the learned reader to find out the possible cracks or gaps in the text, expecting all the while to find a deep fissure that Derrida characterizes as "the abyss."

Fallibility:

In his influential study of narrative style *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), Wayne C. Booth coined the term 'unreliable narrator' (the widespread version of the fallible narrator), a literary device in which the credibility of the narrator is seriously compromised. (www.wikipedia.org) He described how modern novels have gradually moved away from using such 'implied, dramatized narrators,' usually called omniscient narrators, in favour of dramatized, often unreliable narration provided by the story's characters. (Watts 2001: 168)

In the prevailing literary parlance, both terms 'objective narrator' and 'omniscient narrator' are reserved for non-participant voices. And the term 'non-participant', in turn, means simply not embodied in a fictional character that exists in a time and space continuous with that of the characters' involved in the action. The term 'reliable narrator' (like its counterpart 'unreliable narrator') is used to describe participant narrators – i.e., characters (whether central or marginal to the story's main action) who tell us a story. (www.k-state.edu)

A fallible narrator is usually a first-person narrator (third-person narrators can also be fallible) that for some reason has compromised point-of-view. In all stories with the first-person narrator, the narrator serves as a filter for the events. What the narrator does not know or observe cannot be explained to the reader. Usually, however, the reader trusts that the narrator is knowledgeable and truthful enough to give an accurate representation of the story. In the case of a fallible narrator, the reader has reasons not to trust what the narrator is saying. (Hewitt 2005)

This fallibility can be ascribed to the narrator's psychological instability, a powerful bias, a lack of knowledge, or even a deliberate attempt to deceive the reader. (www.wikipedia.org) John Hewitt extends the reasons to include the following:

1. The narrator may be of a dramatically different age than the people in the story, such as a child attempting to explain adult actions,
2. The narrator may have prejudices about race, class or gender. This may lead to the fact that he expresses ideas or values which are not reprehensible by the reader,
3. The narrator may have low intelligence, or when he is incapacitated,
4. The narrator may suffer from hallucinations or dementia,
5. The narrator may have a personality flaw, such as a pathological lying or narcissism. He may follow self-interest, or
6. The narrator may be trying to make a point that is contrary to actions of the story or be attempting to libel one of the characters due to a grudge. (Hewitt 2005; See also www.faculty.smu.edu)

Whatever flaw the narrator has, the reader will realize that the narrator's interpretation of the events, or point-of-view, cannot be fully trusted. This spoils one important traditional element of reception, that of the willing suspension of disbelief on which narrative literature depends heavily. As a result, the reader will begin his own opinions about the events and motivations. Some readers will be put off by this approach, or even they can be pulled out of the story when they realize that the narrator cannot be trusted. Hewitt believes that telling a tale from this point-of-view can be problematic. There is a fine line between distrusting the narrator and distrusting the writer. (Ibid) Writers can distinguish themselves from their narrators by dramatizing them as characters in their own right or even by providing readers with clues that some narration may be unreliable. The use of such dramatized narrators has become a hallmark of modern fiction. (Booth 1961: 18) So when done badly, a story written from this viewpoint can be viewed as manipulative, misleading, confusing and pretentious. When successful, however, the results can be fascinating. In addition, excellent fiction can be created using any or all conceivable states of the narrator's fallibility, and a very good number of stories depend on the ambiguity and shades between reliability and unreliability to achieve their effects.

The problems arise when readers and writers fail to agree on the degree and extent of a narrator's fallibility. Also, these problems become serious when the narrator departs from the true understanding of events shared between the reader and the implied author. This discrepancy between the fallible narrator's viewpoint and the view that readers suspect to be more accurate creates a sense of irony. This does not mean that such a narrator is morally untrustworthy or a habitual liar (although this may be true in some senses as mentioned above), since this category includes harmlessly naïve or ill-informed narrators. (www.questia.com)

This literary device of the fallible narrator is not (or should not be) confused with other devices such as euphemism, hyperbole, irony, metaphor, pathetic fallacy, personification, sarcasm, or satire; it may, however, coexist with such devices like satirical pieces which are built on satire in addition to the fact that their narrators are generally fallible. Similarly, historical novels, speculative fiction, and dream sequences are generally not considered instances of fallible narration, even though they describe events that did not or could not happen. (www.amazon.com)

Deconstruction and the Reader:

The classic realist text has lost the traditional privilege that it is a true reflection of the world. Instead it is possible to recognize it as a construct and so to treat it as available for deconstruction, that is, the analysis of the process and conditions of its construction out of the available discourses. (Selden 1989: 104) The object of deconstructing the text, therefore, is to examine the process of its production – not the private experiences of the individual writer, but the mode of production, the materials and their arrangement in the work. The objective is find out the contradiction (if there is any) within the text, the point at which it transgresses, or goes beyond the limits within which it is constructed, breaks free of the constraints imposed by its own realist form. Hence, when the text is composed of contradictions, it is no longer restricted to a single, harmonious and authoritative reading. Instead it becomes plural, open to re-reading, no longer an object for passive consumption but an object of work by the reader to produce meaning. (Belsey 1988: 107)

In his influential book *S/Z* (1970), Roland Barthes states that the text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible. The reader gains access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one. This plurality is due to the infinity of language and the reader. The reader is not an innocent subject, anterior to the text. The reader who approaches the text is already a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite, or lost. (Selden ed. 1988: 300)

Barthes developed a theory of codes that represent systems of meaning which the reader activates in response to the text. These codes are five: hermeneutic, semic, symbolic, proairetic and cultural. The use of these codes does not result in the revelation of a structure in the text, but rather in a structuration – an activation of the text's signifiers. Although this reading process is in response to the text, it cannot result in an interpretation or a fixing of meaning, because the text is only a portion of 'already written' awaiting the reader's uniting of the text to the 'general text'. (Selden 1989: 119; See also Simon ed. 2004: 85-90)

The object of the critic, then, is to seek not the unity of the work, but the multiplicity and diversity of its possible meanings, its incompleteness, the omissions which it displays but cannot describe, and above all its contradictions. In its absences, and in the collisions between its divergent meanings, the text implicitly criticizes its own ideology; it contains within itself the critique of its own values, in the sense that it is available for a new process of production of meaning by the reader. (Belsey 1988: 109)

This is directly connected with the post-structuralist discourse that propagated the idea of the impersonality and the death of the author. In his famous essay "The Death of the Author", Barthes argues that the person of the author is replaced by the subject. The author, in this case, is no longer the origin and he/she cannot express anything but only mix the chains of discourse which constitute the 'general text'. This impersonality of the author is supported by what Fredric Jameson called 'the prison-house of language.' The author, then, is not an emphatic receptor or catalyst or a craftsman, but an 'empty subject' awaiting the moment of 'enunciation'. (Selden 1989: 305)

Barthes was not the first to propagate these ideas of construction. One of the most influential precursors of Barthes' ideas, especially those evinced in *S/Z*, was Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production* (first published in 1966). In this book, Macherey anticipated Barthes in demonstrating that contradiction is a condition of narrative. The classic realist text, he believes, is constructed on the basis of enigma. Information is initially withheld on condition of a promise to the reader that it will finally be revealed. This revelation brings the story to an end. Therefore, the movement of the story is both towards concealment (continuation) and towards disclosure (end), prolonging itself by delaying the end by series of reticences, as Barthes calls them 'snares for the reader', partial answers to the questions raised, or 'equivocations'. (Belsey 1988: 106)

Macherey's way of reading is precisely contrary to the traditional Anglo-American critical practice, where quest is for the unity of the work, its coherence, a way of repairing any deficiencies in consistency by reference to the author's philosophy or the contemporary world picture. In this smoothing out contradiction, closing the text, criticism becomes the accomplice of ideology. Having created a canon of accepted texts, criticism then provides them with acceptable interpretations, thus effectively censoring any element in them which comes into collision with the dominant ideology. To deconstruct the text, on the other hand, is to open it, to release the possible positions of its intelligibility, including those which reveal the partiality (in both senses) of the ideology inscribed in the text. (Belsey: 109)

In his *Structuralist Poetics* (1975) and *The Pursuit of Signs* (1981), Jonathan Culler argues that the structuralist's task is not to provide more interpretations or to adjudicate the existing ones. Because different readers discover different

structures in what they read, we cannot discover *the* structure of a particular text. What can be observed is the fact that readers display a 'literary competence' (which echoes Saussure's linguistic competence) in their interpretive activity. Culler thinks that this competence is a unified and universal phenomenon. (Selden 1989: 115)

Barthes' approach is poststructuralist in the sense that he does not believe that any definite structure of meaning can be established either in the text or in the reader. Culler's notion of reader strategies is half-way towards a poststructuralist view, since he too rejects the idea of textual structures. For Culler, reading works because readers know how to read: they possess literary competence. His approach could be radicalized by asking questions about the institutional and ideological foundations of literary competence. For Barthes, reading is a sort of writing, which involves producing the texts' signifiers by allowing them to be caught up in the network of codes. (Ibid: 120)

This idea of reading as writing can be seen as an intelligent extension of reader-response criticism. The reader-response critics believe that a literary text is not like a monument or objective entity with a fixed set of characteristics which the reader simply takes in at a glance. Texts are full of gaps, cracks, blanks, ambiguities, indeterminacies, which the reader must fill, close up, or develop. (Ibid: 121-22)The reader expects always to find a deep fissure that Derrida characterizes as the 'abyss'. He/She searches for the '*differance*', Derrida's term for describing the "tendency of meaning to inhere in items which differ from one another". (Crowley 1989: 55)

Derrida's poststructuralist ideas are a direct response to structuralism and an attempt to undermine the practice of logocentrism in Western cultures. Logocentrism stems from the Greek term *logos*, identified with God, "the absolute source of truth, which Derrida claims to be an illusion" (Haney 1989: 243). Derrida contends that logocentrism generates and depends upon a framework of two-word oppositions, such as truth / lie, male / female with the first of each pair being unfairly favoured. Derrida (1981: 56-7) thinks that in a traditional philosophical opposition we do not have a peaceful coexistence of the opposing terms but a violent hierarchy. One term dominates the other and occupies the higher position. To deconstruct the opposition is to reverse this hierarchy.

Some reader-response critics place an emphasis on the reader's contribution to the text's meaning, while others recognize that there are 'triggers' in the text which direct the reader's interpretive activity. Wolfgang Iser solves the problem by distinguishing between the 'implied reader', whom the text creates for itself through 'response-inviting structures' which predispose us to read in certain ways, and the 'actual reader' who brings to the act of reading a certain stock of experiences which colour the reading process. (Selden 1989: 122)

In *The Act of Reading* (1978), Iser argues that the reader's communication with the text is a dynamic process of self-correction, as he formulates signifieds which he must then continually modify (in a previous paper I referred to this process as schema change). Iser's reception theory is an attempt to integrate textual analysis with affective criticism. Its strength lies in its dynamic approach to the reading process; the text ceases to be treated as a static object and becomes a changing 'gestalt'. (Selden ed.1988: 214-18; See also Holland 1975, qtd. in ibid: 218-19)

Furthermore, this act of communication cannot only exist between the reader and the text. In narratives, the reader communicates with the narrator as he/she communicates with the text. This new kind of communication is also dynamic, especially when the reader-response analysis depends largely on the sophistication of the reader's (or the critic's) metatheoretical approach to the reading process. (Hall 2001: 49-50) As it is stated earlier, the ideal response to the narrative happens through the willing suspension of disbelief. However, when the reader detects some triggers that shake the roots of the narrator's reliability, he/she cannot enjoy this disbelief fully. Once the seed of this weakening reliability begins to grow, the reader begins to accumulate proofs that pull the narrator down from his traditional position as a highly trusted reporter of events.

A Deconstructionist Approach to *The Great Gatsby*:

Deconstructionist strategies can be used to analyze F.Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, a work of lasting literary value in part because of its curious narrative incongruities, dualities and the duplicitous nature of its narrator.

In telling his version of the story of Jay Gatsby, Nick Carraway presents the audience an unsettling dilemma that is ultimately irresolvable using traditional methods of literary criticism. After suspending belief and literally accepting the narrator's calmly delivered assertion that "Gatsby turned out all right" (Fitzgerald 1925: 2), even the most sophisticated readers are perplexed near the end of the novel when we must witness his violent death. Carraway leads us to expect developments that allow Gatsby to triumph in the end; but our expectation is subverted by Nick's reticence in the treatment of Gatsby's mysterious origins, by his romantic treatment of Gatsby and daisy's relationship as young lovers, by his late presentation of Gatsby's flawed character, and by his deceptive observations of a series of events in which he participates as a character and describes as the novel's narrator. The sense of disillusionment we feel is mainly attributed to this fallible narrator.

Nick is more than a fallible narrator. He is dishonest and hypocritical. As an amoral relativist, he adopts the most comfortable and interesting position at any given time and expects us to believe him and even sympathize with him because,

unlike Gatsby, he comes from a "prominent well-to-do" family and describes himself as "tolerant" and nonjudgmental. In the opening paragraphs of the novel he says he is "inclined to reserve all judgments," but he later admits that he did judge Gatsby. The last time he saw Gatsby alive, Nick compared him favourably to Daisy and Tom: "They're rotten crowd …. You're worth the whole damn bunch put together." But he tells us, "I've always been glad I said that. It was the only compliment I ever gave him, because I disapproved of him from beginning to end" (103). His deception is further developed in numerous subtle ways as the story unfolds and folds back on itself and we learn more about Gatsby and Nick. For example, Nick says, "I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known" (39); yet, he is a man who moved to the East Coast to avoid telling a woman he did not want to marry her. Nick is not an innocent bystander: He socializes with Tom and his mistress while also assuming a position of loyalty to Daisy and Gatsby. He is a man who entered willingly into a conspiracy with Jordan Baker to bring Daisy and Gatsby together, knowing Gatsby was out to destroy the Buchanans' marriage. This is a man who sneaks up to Daisy's house and peaks through the kitchen window to watch her and Tom for Gatsby after Myrtle's death and later describes them as "conspiring together" (97). We do not realize until late in the novel that this "honest" man is, in actuality, dishonest. And we begin to question Nick's contradictory statements and wonder about his motives.

A duality of main characters appears when we juxtapose the words 'Gatsby' and 'Nick' as opposites in Derrida's logocentric prescriptive form: Gatsby/ Nick. Gatsby is favoured in the title as the novel's main character, but Nick is the survivor who is finally favoured: He lives to tell the story. This subtle inversion allows Nick to replace the main character. The privileged first form, Gatsby, is ultimately placed under erasure by the second form, Nick. The duality that exists in Nick's character – narrator and writer – places him in a position to destruct Gatsby's even as he constructs it on the book's pages. As narrator, Nick at first appears to defer to Gatsby's memory by suggesting admiration is the reason for writing the story; but he later demonstrates "unaffected" or sincere "scorn" for Gatsby, which clearly indicates a different relationship than is presented at the beginning of the book. The result of this contradictory attitude represents a "*differance*" in meaning. Gatsby, however, is reinscribed through Nick's memory and his process of writing, and the story is what remains as a "trace" of the original main character.

Thus, through the use of deconstructive reading technique, we find a new insight into the irresolvable dilemma: Everything turns out all right for Nick; everything turns out all wrong for Gatsby. Although Gatsby and Nick both "live on" in a sense in the novel, it is Nick who finally achieves his dream by ascribing to the literary tradition of immortality through the written word. Nick hints at his literary aspirations and his particular version of the American Dream in the first chapter when he describes his career preparations early in the summer of 1922:

> There was so much to read …. . I bought a dozen volumes on banking and credit and investment securities, and they stood on my shelf in red and gold like new money from the mint, promising to unfold the shining secrets that only Midas and Morgan and Maecenas knew. And I had the high intention of reading many other books besides. I was rather literary in college – one year I wrote a series of very seldom and obvious editorials for the *Yale News* – and now I was going to bring back all such things into my life … . (3)

Nick tells us he set out with professional and personal goals – with the dual purpose of becoming a bond salesman and a "well-rounded man" of letters. He also subconsciously alludes to his interest in writing by misusing literary terminology in at least one scene containing his dialogue: Instead of using the term "slander," which would be correct in reference to a spoken slur, Nick uses the term for a written slur. He says, "It's a *libel* (emphasis added). I'm too poor," in responding to a question from Daisy and Tom about hearing of his engagement to "a girl out West" (14). "Of course I knew what they were referring to, but I wasn't even vaguely engaged," Nick lies. "The fact that gossip had published the banns was one of the reasons I had come East." Later he tells us he had been writing letters once a week to the girl, whom he described as a friend, and signing them "Love, Nick" (39)

Nick ends up reinventing his role and usurping Gatsby's privileged position to become the protector and advancer of the "last and greatest of all human dreams" while Gatsby's fading romanticized dreams become rather trivial, superficial, and self-serving (121). Gatsby falls into the abyss. Nick lets us know that Daisy was not worthy of Gatsby's love and dreams after all: She and Tom are careless people who "smash up things and creatures and then retreat back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made" (120)

And evidently, Nick judged Jordan Baker as unworthy of his love. At their last meeting, Jordan chastises him for his dishonesty and his hypocritical reaction to the accident and the murder, which caused him to abruptly end their affair: "I mean it was careless of me to make such a wrong guess," she tells him. "I thought you were rather an honest, straight-forward person. I thought it was your secret pride." Nick, who describes himself as angry and still half in love with her, peevishly replies, "I'm thirty … I'm five years too old to lie to myself and call it honor" (119). But he does lie to himself and to the reader. In his contradictory statement, which is odd but in character with his relativistic nature, he admits that he is dishonest. In this case, he does reserve honest judgment now; but this he provides a new proof that he is not a man of integrity and he is really fallible

(www.Dream essays. com) because he remains aware of her selfishness and is not shocked by her carelessness.

At the very end of the novel, Nick retrospectively positions himself to look forward to his own future, his own hopes, while still reflecting on Gatsby's shattered dreams:

> I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way … and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him … .
>
> Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter – tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther …. (121)

Nick may present himself as being as being initially reluctant to capitalize on what he earlier describes as his "interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men" (2); but it is his bittersweet fate and his main intention from the beginning of the novel to "repeat the past" by reinventing and expressing in writing what he terms as "riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart" (1). Nick does not glorify love, romance, or Gatsby after all. His real role, as the main character/narrator, is to advance his own stylized version of the quest for the capturing the elusive, ever vanishing American Dream – individual wealth, power, social position and immortality – for future readers.

A Concluding Remark:

One can venture to think that Nick's fallibility in reflecting Jay Gatsby's personality has rendered the novel a good service. This may be the best way to conjure up a sense of mystery that cannot be solved. When everything is said and done, Gatsby remains elusive, indiscernible and unfathomable. Therefore, the character's myth is never ever broken up.

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لاعصمة رواية الشخص الأول: دور القاريء في تفكيك رواية جاتسبي العظيم

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ملخص

في كتابه المشهور (بلاغة الرواية)، صاغ الناقد وين سي بوذ مصطلح الراوي غير الموثوق، اذ تكون مصداقية الراوي في هذه الحالة مثار شك. ويمكن أن يعزى انعدام الثقة هذا الى عدم الأتزان النفسي أو الأنحياز أو قلة المعرفة أو حتى محاولة مقصودة لخداع القاريء. وغالبا مايكون الراوي غير المعصوم هذا هو راوي الشخص الأول. ومثال على هذا الراوي يبرز نيك كاراوي، الراوي البطل في رواية جاتسبي العظيم (العمل ذو الصدى الأدبي الخالد). فالقاريء في هذه الحالة يواجه تحد ليس سبر غور المعاني أو القراءات المتعددة حسب، بل اختبار مدى مصداقية هذا الراوي المتفرد. ويمكن أن يستعان هنا بآليات التفكيكية من قبل القاريء المتمرس لأكتشاف فجوات النص ليجد دائما شقا عميقا يصفه ديريدا بالهوة.