

Unreliable Nick—Analysis of the Unreliable Narration in *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract: *The Great Gatsby* is American writer F. Scott Fitzgerald's representative work. Nick is not only one of the main characters in the novel, but also the narrator of the novel. In the field of narratology, Nick assumes the role of unreliable narrator. Based on the classification of unreliable narration by James Phelan, this paper analyzes Nick's unreliability respectively on three axes: the axis of facts/events, the axis of values/ethics, and the axis of knowledge/perception, aiming to better understand F. Scott Fitzgerald's underlying and connotative thematic concerns beneath Nick's seemingly unreliable narration.

Key words: F. Scott Fitzgerald; *The Great Gatsby*; unreliable narration

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1. Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald, an American novelist and playwright in the 20th century, was the most important writer in the Jazz Age. Among all the works of Fitzgerald, the most representative one should be *The Great Gatsby*, which was published in 1925. T.S. Eliot once praised *The Great Gatsby* as the first step of American fiction has taken since Henry James. Since the 1960s, *The Great Gatsby* has become a well-known classic of American literature. *The Great Gatsby* is regarded as the best embodiment of Fitzgerald's narrative skills and thoughts.

The main idea of the novel is that Gatsby is a poor man in the Middle East of the United States. He fell in love with a rich girl named Daisy. Later, WWI broke out and Gatsby went to Europe to participate in the war. But when he came back, he found that Daisy had married a rich dandy named Tom Buchanan. Gatsby was exceedingly miserable. He decided to become a rich man for he felt that it is poverty that led to his failure. After a few years, he succeeded. He bought a luxury villa opposite Daisy's house and often held grand banquets to attract Daisy. With the help of neighbor Nick Carraway, he finally saw Daisy

again. But Daisy at this time is no longer the Daisy of the past. She has lost her pure heart. Daisy accidentally killed Tom's mistress when she lost control of her car. However, Gatsby took all the blame on himself to protect her. Finally, Gatsby was killed by the husband of Tom's mistress but Daisy did not even attend Gatsby's funeral in the end.

The novel is narrated in the first person by one of the main characters—Nick. Nick accidentally broke into Gatsby's life and witnessed the shattering of Gatsby's illusory dream. Nick is not only the participant of the story, but also the observer and narrator of the story. His views actually also represent those of Fitzgerald himself. In this book, we could see Gatsby died for love at all costs, the lavish and ostentatious lifestyle of upper-class, the emptiness and degeneration of the young generation after the WWI, as well as Fitzgerald's dissatisfaction with the society at that time.

At the beginning of publication, *The Great Gatsby* did not cause a sensation. It was until the 1960s that this novel was favored by many literary critics. The domestic and international scholars have done numerous studies on F. Scott Fitzgerald and *The Great Gatsby*. Overall,

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researchers at home and abroad pay more attention to its theme, language feature, and narrative strategies. By analyzing these theses, it can be found that most of the research so far focus on the topics of the disillusion of American dream, the use of symbolism, the arrangement of Nick's first-person narration and unreliable narrator, etc.

When it comes to the unreliability of Nick's narration, some scholars had carried out some research on it. Guo Hailing (2017), in the thesis, *An Analysis of the Unreliability of Calloway's Narration in The Great Gatsby*, analyzes Nick's unreliability from his character defects and moral defects, as well as Nick's function as an unreliable narrator. In *An Analysis of Narrative Techniques in The Great Gatsby*, Lu Di (2009) regards Nick as an unreliable narrator. The use of unreliable narrators in the novel can promote the communication between readers and authors. In the thesis, *The Tenderness of "Self-exposure"—On Nick's Unreliable Narration in The Great Gatsby from the Perspective of Narrative Evaluation*, Tan Zhenrong and Chen Tingting (2021), expounds the unreliability of Nick's narration from three aspects: the narrator, the focus of narration and the emotional deviation of the narrator.

However, most scholars only stay on the proof that Nick is an unreliable narrator or Nick's function as an unreliable narrator, while studies on Nick's unreliable narration with the combination of unreliable theory are limited. Therefore, this thesis tries to explore Nick's function as an unreliable narrator with the combination of James Phelan's narrative theory and the text of the novel. The combination of narrative theory and the text of the novel can help us better understand Fitzgerald's narrative skills and the implied meaning of Fitzgerald himself under Nick's seemingly unreliable narration.

2. Unreliable Narration Theory

Unreliable narration, that is, the unreliability of narration, has become a hot research topic in the field of narratology since the 1980s. Many scholars at home and abroad have done a lot of research on it. The studies of unreliable narration mainly have two approaches, one is rhetorical approach, the other is cognitive approach. This thesis mainly focuses on the theory of rhetorical approach represented by Wayne Booth and James Phelan.

2.1 Wayne Booth's Unreliable Narration Theory

The word "unreliable narration" was first put forward by Wayne Booth in 1961, an American literary critic, in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, which became the first work of rhetoric approach. Then James Phelan, Booth's student and friend, inherited Booth's view and expanded the classification of unreliable narration.

Booth's unreliable narration theory focuses more on the implied author. Therefore, when we discuss Booth's unreliable narrative theory, it is necessary to understand this term first. According to Shen Dan, the implied author can be understood as the author's "second self" when creating works. When creating different literary works, the author may hold different stances. These stances or values may not be the same as what they show in real life. The specific "second self" they show when creating a particular work is the implied author of the work (2006). In addition, because the writing purpose of the real author may be different, the implied author in different works of the same author could also be different.

In Booth's view, a narrator is reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the implied author (1983). Therefore, the narration becomes unreliable when the moral norms of the narrator are inconsistent with the implied author. Booth further explains that "unreliable narrators thus differ markedly depending on how far and in what direction they depart from their authors' norms; the older term 'tone', line the currently fashionable terms 'irony' and 'distance,' covers many effects that we should distinguish" (1983).

Based on the interpretation of the above definition of unreliable narration, Booth divides unreliable narration into two categories. One is unreliable reporting, which means that the narrator made a false statement of the facts. And the other is unreliable evaluation, which means that the narrator's statement of characters or events is unfair. At the same time, Shen Dan points out that in either case, "readers need to go through double-decoding: One is the interpretation of the narrator's words; the other is to deduce the real fact or make the correct judgment by deviating or surpassing the narrator's narration" (2006).

2.2 Phelan's Unreliable Narration Theory

As an authority in the field of American narrative

theory, James Phelan inherited most of Booth's views on unreliable narration. But unlike Booth's focus on the implied author, Phelan pays more attention to the changes of unreliable narration in narrative process. In Phelan's view, "the narrator performs three main roles: reporting, interpreting and evaluating. Sometimes they perform the roles simultaneously and sometimes sequentially" (2005). Considering the three roles of the narrator, Phelan expanded the classification of unreliable narration into three different axes, that is the axis of facts/events, the axis of values/ethics, and the axis of knowledge/perception. Among them, the third axis is what Booth did not pay attention to.

In *Living To Tell About It*, Phelan explains that "the audience might have two different reactions when they find the narrator's statements are unreliable. One is to reject the narrator's words and construct a satisfactory narration, and the other is to accept the narrator's words but supplement his narration" (2005). Therefore, combining the activities of the narrator and the audience, he further enriched six subtypes along three axes: misreporting and underreporting along the axis of fact/events, misregarding and underregarding along the axis of ethics/values, and misreading and underreading along the axis of knowledge/perception.

Shang Biwu points out that "Although Phelan has mentioned readers, he still discusses the relationship between the narrator and the implied author most of the time. And he neglects the cognitive psychology of the readers" (2008). This is also a blind spot of the rhetoric school. But it is no denying that Phelan's classification plays an important role in the systematic research and further improvement of unreliable narration.

In general, since Booth first proposed the concept of unreliable narration in 1961, his theory has been accepted by most narratologists. Scholars of rhetoric approach represented by Phelan continuously improved Booth's theory. However, considering that there are still some irreconcilable contradictions between the rhetorical approach and the cognitive approach, the author believes that it is necessary to continue the relevant research. Only in this way can we better integrate the advantages of the two approaches. Based on the above theories,

this paper takes the novel *The Great Gatsby* as the text, trying to analyze the unreliable narration in order to better understand the deep thematic concern of this novel.

The Great Gatsby adopts the first-person perspective to narrate. Nick has a double identity in the novel. He is both the character and narrator of the novel. In this novel, he is Gatsby's neighbor and Daisy's cousin. His identity enables him to tell us the story of Gatsby and Daisy as a witness. Nevertheless, Nick's narrative cannot be fully trusted. In fact, he assumes the role of an unreliable narrator. Based on the text of the novel, this thesis will respectively discuss Nick's unreliable narration on the axis of facts/events, the axis of values/ethics and the axis of knowledge/perception.

3. Nick's Unreliability in the Axis of Facts/Events

At the beginning of the novel, Nick is eager to show his reliability to the readers. He boasts that "I am inclined to reserve all judgements" (Fitzgerald, 1993) and this habit makes many people willing to open their hearts to him. But in fact, he is far from amiable and reliable than he said. On the contrary, he always judges the other characters that surround him. In Nick's narration, the person who confides to him is considered as "veteran bores", Gatsby represents everything for which he has "an unaffected scorn", and even Jordan Baker, whom he adores, is labeled as an "incurable dishonesty" by him.

Here we can see that Nick's behavior is obviously contradictory to his boasting. He is not familiar with the people around him, especially the impression of Gatsby is based on gossip from others. But the funny thing is Nick flaunted himself as "one of the few honest people that I have ever known" (Fitzgerald, 1993). It is obviously unfair and unreliable to judge others from this perspective. Therefore, to a certain extent, we can think Nick's narration is unreliable.

In addition, Nick also hid his emotional experience. At the first meeting, Daisy asked Nick if he was engaged, and Nick's answer was "It's a libel" (Fitzgerald, 1993). Even though Daisy insisted that they had heard about it from three people, Nick still regarded it as a rumor. But in chapter 3, when Jordan Baker revealed his heart to him, he had an inner statement:

"I knew that first I had to get myself definitely out

of that tangle back home. I'd been writing letters once a week and signing them: 'Love, Nick', and all I could think of was how, when that certain girl played tennis, a faint moustache of perspiration appeared on her upper lip." (Fitzgerald, 1993)

From the above paragraphs, we can infer that Nick did have an affair with a girl in West Egg. His account of the event was incorrect and was an underreporting of the facts. Nick's concealment of the facts corresponds to the unreliable narration on the axis of facts/events mentioned by Phelan.

4. Nick's Unreliability in the Axis of Values/Ethics

Rimon-Kenan points out that "unreliable narration is not consistent with the moral values of the implied author, so the description or evaluation made by such a narrator on the work makes the reader have reason to be suspicious" (1983). Therefore, to prove Nick is an unreliable narrator in the axis of values/ethics, we need to find the difference between his moral values and the implied author.

The Great Gatsby describes an era of debauchery and extravagance, with serious spiritual crisis lurking beneath the surface. Fitzgerald wants to criticize the trend of money worship and moral degradation at that time. And Gatsby in the novel is a typical representative of this era. In Nick's narrative, Gatsby was lavish with his money, held luxurious banquets and tried to integrate himself into the upper class. However, his superficial brilliance and clumsy lies were easily seen through by Nick in the next relationship. Nick's attitude towards Gatsby at this time was full of contempt. However, when he learned that Gatsby's reason for holding the party was to expect Daisy to come one day, and that buying luxurious house and accumulating wealth by unfair means was to get close to Daisy, he was moved by Gatsby's persistence and began to sympathize with Gatsby. Nick's moral view had begun to deviate from the moral values of the implied author.

In chapter 7, the conflict between Tom, Daisy and Gatsby reaches the climax. The fierce conflict about whom Daisy loves and whom she will choose erupts under the pressure of two men. Tom revealed Gatsby's illicit liquor business and his elaborate disguise, breaking Gatsby's carefully maintained self-esteem. After the accident,

Nick was shocked by the fact that Gatsby took the blame for Daisy. He sincerely admired Gatsby's dedication to love. As some scholars point out that, "Nick no longer regards Gatsby as an upstart in his heart, but a brave actor and a staunch guardian of love and ideals" (Tan & Chen, 2021).

Based on the above analysis, we can find that Nick's narration deviates from the moral values of the implied author. He is undoubtedly an unreliable narrator, whose unreliable narration occurs on the axis of values/ethics.

5. Nick's Unreliability in the Axis of Perception/Knowledge

Because Nick is unreliable on the axis of values/ethics, his cognitive ability under the guidance of this value must also be defective, which leads to the unreliable narration of Nick on the axis of knowledge/perception. The scholar Lu Di points out that "One could not understand everything. In order to fill the gap in narration, Nick would inevitably use others' words to narrate the development of events or tell the truth of the facts" (2009).

One case in point is in chapter 4, there is a paragraph Jordan telling how Gatsby first met Daisy:

"One October day in 1917 – (said Jordan Baker that afternoon, sitting up very straight on a straight chair in the tea-garden at the Plaza Hotel) – I was walking along from one place to another, half on the sidewalks and half on the lawns..." (Fitzgerald, 1993)

Another example is Nick learned from Mr. Wolfsheim that Gatsby is "a man of fine breeding". Nick described Gatsby as a "man you'd like to take home and introduce to your mother and sister" (Fitzgerald, 1993). However, Mr. Wolfsheim himself is a gambler who once manipulated a competition. His own moral defects make readers question the authenticity of his praise for Gatsby.

Nick doesn't know enough about Gatsby, so he must enrich Gatsby's image through others' mouth, which makes Nick's narration unreliable on the axis of knowledge/perception. Inevitably, the narration of Gatsby by different characters in the novel will lead to misreading or underreading.

Overall, due to the deepening friendship between Nick and Gatsby, Nick's narration has gradually lost its impartiality. Based on the above careful analysis of the

text, we can draw a conclusion that Nick is an unreliable narrator and his narration is unreliable on the axis of facts/events, the axis of values/ethics and the axis of knowledge/perception.

6. Function of Nick as Unreliable Narrator

6.1 Unreliable Narration and Irony

Scholar Shen Dan points that “when readers find that the narrator’s narration of the events or his values are unreliable, ironic effects often occur” (2009). In the previous chapter, we have analyzed Nick’s unreliability on three axes. His stance contradicts the implied author, so his narration is unreliable. In Nick’s eye, Gatsby started from scratch and achieved wealth by his own efforts. His persistence and loyalty to Daisy are impressive. However, from the perspective of the implied author, Gatsby is a speculator engaged in bootlegging. At the same time, he collaborates with Mr. Wolfsheim and engages in illegal activities. Gatsby is a complete hypocrite. Therefore, this clearly constitutes a strong irony.

The third chapter of the novel describes the spectacular scene of the extravagant dance held in Gatsby’s mansion: The endless sound of music, the dazzling dishes and wine, the guests in gorgeous clothes.....Gatsby’s extremely luxurious lifestyle forms a sharp contrast with the hard life of the lower class people represented by Wilson and Myrtle in the novel. To some extent, they are also representatives of the oppressed people in that era. With the help of the poor boy Nick, Fitzgerald mocks Gatsby’s luxurious life, which is not only ironic but also authentic.

In addition, the love story between Gatsby and Daisy is also full of irony. To Gatsby, Daisy represents the paragon of perfection. He is determined to win Daisy back and willing to do everything necessary in order to achieve it. He takes the blame for Daisy when she commits a crime and takes a great man. But it is ironic that after Gatsby’s death, Daisy even did not attend his funeral. Daisy’s beauty makes the American Dream more attractive and seductive. But she is also fickle, shallow, bored, and sardonic, which indicate the worthlessness of the American Dream and the blindness of the pursuers. Some scholars believe that Fitzgerald was full of irony at Gatsby’s love story with Gatsby, but he also showed deep sympathy (Xuan, 2021).

In general, Fitzgerald used Nick’s unreliable narration to satirize Nick’s recognition of Gatsby’s values, and then satirize people like Gatsby’s who believed that money was omnipotent. Fitzgerald ironically portrayed Gatsby’s image as a shining one, but Gatsby’s ending was very bleak. The “great” Gatsby is not great. Fitzgerald deeply criticizes hedonism and the distorted values of the Jazz Age where money is paramount.

6.2 Unreliable Narration and Theme

Nick, the unreliable narrator of the novel, actually represents Fitzgerald’s own attitude and stance, so the novel has an obvious autobiographical tendency. Fitzgerald focuses on the exploration of the spiritual world of human beings. Although the content is subjective, the writer still uses objective forms to express it. This is also the reason why Fitzgerald chose Nick, one of the characters in the story, as the narrator.

In literary works, unreliable narration contains rich theme connotation. In *The Great Gatsby*, the narrator Nick is unreliable in the narrative process of the story because the whole 1920s were vacillating between the old values and the new life standards, which is the reason why the American writers of the 1920s were called the Lost Generation. On the one hand, Nick shows his ridicule and contempt for the lower class in his narration, whether intentional or unintentional. On the other hand, He is full of respect for people like Gatsby who win success by their own efforts. This was also a psychological state prevalent in American society at that time. With the development of American economy, people are eager to ascend the upper class and realize their American Dream. However, Gatsby’s dream is a dream after all. What we can see in *The Great Gatsby* is that even with a large amount of wealth, people who were born in poverty cannot gain stature they dream of. This novel shows Fitzgerald’s satire on the so-called American Dream claimed to be realized by hard-working and diligence.

But for all that, Gatsby himself is “great”. At the end of the novel, the author writes, “So we beat on, boat against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (Fitzgerald, 1993). The rowers try to go upstream, but the current always push them back to the starting point. No matter how hard we work in life, our past is our anchor

and burden, and we can never try to rewrite the past like Gatsby. Phelan regards it as the belief of the implied author, which mixes romanticism and cynicism (2002). Fitzgerald asks us to think about this mixture as the final reflection on Gatsby and Nick, as well as ourselves. He seems to want to say that when people persist in creating a perfect past, it will lead to destruction, just like Gatsby's dream. Life is like a boat sailing against the current. It must forge ahead or it will be driven back. This sense of emptiness implies Fitzgerald's deep concern about American society at that time.

7. Conclusion

Through a detailed analysis, we can conclude that Nick is an unreliable narrator. His narration is unreliable on the axis of facts/event, the axis of values/ethics, and the axis of knowledge/perception. This thesis further explores Fitzgerald's intention to portray Nick as both a character and narrator, and excavates the profound and connotative thematic concerns of the novel under Nick's seemingly unreliable narration.

The Great Gatsby shows the decline of the American Dream in the 1920s. Gatsby appears to be the embodiment of this dream. Through *The Great Gatsby*, we can have a better understanding of American society at that time. Nick's unreliable narration is also one of the important reasons for the enduring fame of *The Great Gatsby*. The interpretation of the unreliable narration will also help us to appreciate the narrative techniques of Fitzgerald from a new point of view.

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