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Jay Gatsby: Epitome of the American Dream?

In the world of politics, perception is everything. A politician says one thing, and the media spins it so terribly, twisting the words so heavily, the truth is no longer even a footnote. Anybody here ever believe that Al Gore created the internet? No? But I thought that's what he said...? In all reality, while I'd like to thank Al Gore for making research papers less of a task for me than for my parents' generation, that's simply not the truth. Al Gore's words were taken out of context, and as a result, the original sentiment of his statement was lost. So too, in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the eponymous Jay Gatsby is often misrepresented by his neighbor, and our narrator, Nick Carraway. As narrator, Nick writes an account of his life as entangled with Gatsby's, but does so as a recollection of past events, calling into question the reliability of his viewpoint. Because his narrative is not being recorded in real time, as the events unfold, Nick has the ability to manipulate Gatsby's intentions, both in thought, and in word. By having this ability, he is able to impose his own thoughts and actions onto an unsuspecting Gatsby, and successfully pass them off as Gatsby's own. Throughout the novel, Nick often romanticizes Gatsby, making him out to be a grand figure, worthy of the praise he receives from those around him. However, Nick's words can only stretch so far. Gatsby is often seen as a failed figure of the American Dream, due to his inability to look beyond the past and into the future. This insight into Nick's unreliability as a narrator helps us look past the glamor and the glitz, and see Gatsby's life as it was truly lived, not as Nick portrayed it. Gatsby's inability to embody the American Dream, even as so many were looking to him as an example, proves just how insecure and unsure Americans have historically been in their true identity.

Nick's unreliability as a narrator contributes to a romanticized version of Gatsby in that Gatsby's thoughts are infiltrated by Nick, rendering them no longer his own. Nick narrates this story from the perspective of a man looking back on events in his life that he holds dear. As any man would be, Nick is prone to glamorize these events so as to be able to remember them fondly, rather than with bitterness. This would be all right if he were only speaking of his thoughts, but as he often tells of Gatsby's mindset throughout, Nick becomes considerably less reliable of a narrator. The way Nick goes through the story, he makes observations of what's happening around him, often resulting in physical descriptions and dialogue. For example, there comes a time in the novel where Gatsby shows Daisy his house for the first time, and after she leaves, confides in Nick about his feelings. Nick says, "When [Gatsby] came down the steps at last, the tanned skin was drawn unusually tight on his face, and his eyes were bright and tired" (109). Not much can be done on Nick's part to misinterpret what's happening here. However, he then moves on to his perceptions of the circumstances, as well as Gatsby's perceptions. This is evidenced in the way he interprets Gatsby's actions.

He wanted nothing less of Daisy than that she should go to Tom and say: "I never loved you." After she had obliterated four years with that sentence they could decide upon the more practical measures to be taken. One of them was that, after she was free, they were to go back to Louisville and be married from her house--just as if it were five years ago (109). This is Nick observing Gatsby's actions and assigning purpose to them, without Gatsby's permission. Nick doesn't know what Gatsby's truly thinking, or what he wishes to convey to Daisy, but rather, he's assuming he knows Gatsby's innermost thoughts, and that's from where we draw his unreliability.

When the passive Nick Carraway encounters a man of action such as Jay Gatsby, he's inevitably drawn to him. Not content to sit around and let others have what he believes he rightfully

deserves, Gatsby goes after what he wants. He points his entire life toward the end goal of having Daisy's love, and he takes the steps necessary to reach this goal. He bought his house "so that Daisy would be just across the bay" (78), and throws these grand parties with the hope that she might "wander into one of his parties, some night" (79). Nick, on the other hand, ended up in New York by way of his family deciding for him. "Everybody I knew was in the bond business, so I supposed it could support one more single man. All my aunts and uncles talked it over as if they were choosing a prep school for me, and finally said, 'Why--ye-es,' with very grave, hesitant faces" (3). Even the language Fitzgerald uses here, with Nick "supposing" the bond business could support him, shows Nick unable to be excited about much in his life. So when he comes across Gatsby, a man who knows what he wants and has a plan in action on obtaining it, Nick can't help but be drawn to him and exaggerate his character in order to live vicariously through him.

Nick's awestruck first impression of Gatsby triggers his need to be viewed by others just how Gatsby is. Much speculation has been thrown about by people around the party, but no one has a stout understanding or idea of who Gatsby is. After Nick has unknowingly been sitting at a table and conversing with Gatsby, the two are finally introduced and Nick has his first face to face impression of the man.

He smiled understandingly--much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced--or seemed to face--the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on *you* with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey (48).

At best, this is a highly romanticized picture of a man Nick hardly knows. More realistically, this is a passage in which an unrealistic expectation has been placed upon an unsuspecting subject. Nick has

no idea what Gatsby really means by a simple smile, but this is how he interprets it. This interpretation is cause to wonder why such liberties have been taken by Nick over Gatsby's gesture. Nick sees it like this because this is who he desires to be. People don't react like that to him, and he desires the attention, the prestige, and the wonder that Gatsby's presence demands. So, Nick sees in Gatsby what he would like others to see in himself, and the result is this highly idealized, picturesque version of himself, outwardly known to others as Jay Gatsby.

The way Gatsby has an idealized view of Daisy is not dissimilar to the way Nick looks upon Gatsby. Gatsby has long been in love with Daisy, and this love has caused him to orient his life toward gaining back the love and affection he once had from her. When Nick tries to comfort Gatsby by telling him not to expect too much of Daisy, Gatsby is beside himself.

"Can't repeat the past?" he cried incredulously. "Why of course you can!" He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand. "I'm going to fix everything just the way it was before," he said, nodding determinedly. "She'll see" (110).

He has so idealized his past with Daisy and overlooked any flaws that might have occurred, that anything that could and does happen in the future can never live up to his expectations. It just so happens that Gatsby isn't the only one who does this. The whole novel, Nick falls in love with who Gatsby seems to be. The mystery and intrigue of the man are too much for Nick to pass up, and he spends page after page building Gatsby's character up, until it no longer seems reasonable that quite a man could exist. In the beginning of the novel, Nick tells of Gatsby possessing "an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is likely I shall never find again" (2). Nick holds and gives off such a high opinion of Gatsby, that upon his death, Nick is destroyed. No longer does a man exist who will do anything for love; no longer does a man exist who is so mysterious and wise. Indeed, when Nick speculates that "his

dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it" (180), he's no longer talking about Gatsby and Daisy, but rather himself and his shattered image of Gatsby. Nick's ideal version of himself, Gatsby, is no longer within reach.

In the portions of the novel where Nick is clearly looking back onto these events and remembering them, he makes great comparisons between himself and Gatsby. There are clear correlations, such as, "Gatsby's house was still empty when I left--the grass on his lawn had grown as long as mine" (179), and the more subtle parallels, as seen in the beginning of the novel. "Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men" (2). Of course, the whole novel is Nick's perspective on things from after Gatsby's death, but the raw moments such as this show how truly selfish Nick is in his friend's death. Nick treats Gatsby's death as a stand-in for his own, and this passage more than any other, shows the selfish nature that Nick possesses. Even things that afflict Gatsby, and therefore Nick, are not by any means his fault. He doesn't take responsibility for anything. He never entertains the possibility that he might be the one with the skewed perspective or wrong opinions, but rather blames everything that goes awry in his life on anyone and anything but himself. Of course, this translates to Gatsby's life as well. Instead of him being the one with troubles brought upon by himself, the world is out to get him, and therefore, out to get Nick as well. Nick plays the victim card, and he plays it so well, the two characters blend together as one toward the end of the novel.

Jay Gatsby is a most beloved man in his community, so long as he's opening his home to total strangers for lavish parties. As long as his wealth is to be enjoyed by many, so too, his presence is enjoyed by many. But when the parties go away, and Gatsby dies a tragic death, the only one still standing by his side is Nick. What does this say about our culture? What does it say that a man with seemingly many, many friends, only ends up with one at his funeral? I think what's happening here,

is our author pointing out fatal flaws in our psyche as a nation. I think Fitzgerald is using Gatsby's celebrity status to comment on the tendency our society has to only desire friendship with well-known people, so long as we can gain from it. It's the classic celebrity culture. How many TV shows and movies have been produced where this is the central storyline? A star who has made it big, disguises themselves so they can have true friends, not just people who want their stuff. Point here being that Nick is so insecure in the way he views himself, that when he meets Gatsby, he sees this man with great potential. A man determined to get what he desires, Nick can't help but make him out to be somebody he's not; somebody to be admired and emulated.

Jay Gatsby's fixation on the past never allowed him to look forward to his future. And maybe this is simply another error in narration by Nick, as he wrote this knowing full well Gatsby didn't have a future ahead of him... but it makes us wonder, did Gatsby ever have a real shot at the American Dream? And if even Gatsby, the man whom everybody wanted to be, couldn't quite reach the American Dream, is it really attainable for the rest of us? Is it honestly a realistic endeavor?