

Cats and Dogs in the Great Gatsby

Toward the end of the novel, Nick Carraway refers to the hot summer days on Long Island as "dog-days" (118). "Dog-days" is not a casual idiom, but part of a pattern of canine imagery that reinforces Fitzgerald's theme of human. **The Great Gatsby is at its heart an examination of dog-eat-dog behavior.**

Many characters in the novel are portrayed in canine terms. They live cynically, in the sense of the Greek root *kynikos*, meaning "dog-like." Their "bites," particularly in relationship to the main character, Gatsby, become worse than their "barks." In contrast to this canine element, Gatsby has a "heightened sensitivity" (2) that sets him apart. He is like an aloof and vulnerable cat--a Gatsby-Catsby--who, tragically, by the end of the novel, as Nick Carraway comments, becomes "preyed" upon (2).

Canine imagery first appears in chapter one, when Nick casually tells the reader that he once owned a dog. He lists his possessions: an old Dodge, a Finnish woman who cooks and cleans for him, and his dog. "I had a dog--at least I had him for a few days until he ran away" (3). By lumping car, servant, and dog together, Nick objectifies them; later, by not caring that servant and dog disappear, he reveals a flaw of careless indifference--indifference similar to that which he correctly observes in others.

Canines appear in chapter 2 when Myrtle Wilson decides that she needs a dog. She begs Tom Buchanan to buy her a puppy because, she explains, it will make a cute addition to her apartment. After Tom purchases the dog, Myrtle thinks nothing of confining the animal to one room, with only a cardboard box in which to defecate and a soggy dog biscuit to eat (29). Myrtle's indifference toward her dog mirrors her indifference toward her husband. Later, when she cannot restrain herself, she indulges in a shallow, extra-marital affair with Tom Buchanan.

Myrtle's shallowness is reinforced and augmented in Tom's brutal treatment of her. When Myrtle asks him demurely if the puppy is a "boy or a girl," Tom doesn't mince words: "It's a bitch" (28). Tom's label for Myrtle's dog--"bitch"--summarizes the way in which the narrator describes Myrtle--smoldering with wet lips (25), speaking with a coarse voice (26), pouring out a warm breath (36), and straining her body at the gas pump with a "panting vitality" (68).

Myrtle's dog, on a metaphorical level, not only suggests Myrtle, it also suggests all who are displaced in this murky, jazz-age milieu, which Nick describes as the "valley of ashes." During her crowded cocktail party, Myrtle's dog is stranded on top of the dining room table: "The little dog was sitting on the table looking with blind eyes through the smoke, and from time to time groaning faintly" (37). Similar to T. J. Eckleburg, whose dim eyes with their "eternal blindness" look over the "grotesque garden" of ashes (23), Myrtle's dog tries to peer, like a miniature Cerberus, through Myrtle's miniature hell.

Tom clearly belongs in this hellish environment. In the ugly scene in which he strikes Myrtle across the face, he reveals his brutality. After his abuse, Myrtle is left speechless. Her nose is broken and bleeding: she cowers on the couch in retreat. This retreat foreshadows her final, desperate plunge into the road, where she lies killed in a pool of blood. Tom remarks after her death that she has been run over "like you'd run over a dog" (180).

When Tom tells Nick about his reaction to Myrtle's fate, he pretends great suffering. He says to Nick that when, upon returning to Myrtle's empty apartment, he saw "that damn box of dog biscuits sitting there on the sideboard," he "sat down and cried like a baby" (180). In this context, Tom's supposed "suffering" is

undercut by the triviality of the "dog biscuit" image. According to the Dictionary of American Slang, the term "dog biscuit" was an early-twentieth-century collegiate expression used to describe an unattractive woman (153), an allusion creating further irony.

As Myrtle is like a dog in heat, so Tom acts like a mastiff on the prowl. Daisy describes him as a "great, big hulking physical specimen" (12); Nick speaks of his "great pack of muscle" (7). Myrtle is only one of Tom's conquests. During his honeymoon with Daisy, in a Santa Barbara hotel, he pursues a chambermaid (78). Like an A.K.C. registered hound, his breeding and build are his greatest attributes. Those attributes eventually cause Myrtle to tell her sister that she is dissatisfied with her husband, George; George just doesn't have the proper "breeding." He is not, Myrtle says (like Tom Buchanan), "fit to lick my shoe" (35).

Tom and Myrtle are not alone in having canine traits and pursuits. Wolfsheim the gangster is an underdog on the streets of New York; his name refers to the most primitive form of dog--the wolf. His appearance suggests the canine: dark hairs luxuriate from his nostrils; he has a flat nose and small, intense eyes (173). Metaphorically, he is like a stout, pugnacious bulldog fighting for survival. In order to succeed in the underworld, Wolfsheim must make, as he says, the right "gonnections." One of the "gonnections" whom he says he will "use" (172), is Jay Gatsby.

Gatsby ends up being "used" by almost every character in the novel, but, in contrast to the canine elements, he is neither as doggedly selfish nor as cynical. From the beginning, he is associated with the more solitary cat--an illusive cat with illusive dreams. As Nick first describes him, he has "leisurely movements," with a "secure position of feet upon the lawn" (21). Gatsby is like "the silhouette of a moving cat waver[ing] across the moonlight" (21). He is a lone dreamer who, in the "mysterious excitement" of a cool night, can envision a sidewalk turning into a ladder, a ladder that mounts to a "secret place above the trees," leading to a treasure any cat might seek--the "incomparable milk of wonder" (112).

Gatsby is a man full of "romantic readiness" (2). He always chooses his shirts and ties as carefully as a cat would groom its fur. At once clever and mysterious, when he wants to see Daisy, he furtively gets Nick to invite her for tea. When Nick brings Daisy across the bay to West Egg, Gatsby suddenly disappears--only to reappear again like a cat let out of the bag. At his parties, Gatsby is seen skirting the perimeters--a secretive host who stays apart, watching his guests behave in their "puppyish, convivial way(s)" (50). In the lingo of the Jazz Age, Gatsby is the "cool cat." As Daisy says to him, "Ah! . . . you look so cool . . . you always look so cool" (119).

Gatsby's being a "cool cat" has its advantages, but eventually, he is outmaneuvered. When he confronts Tom in the Plaza suite with Daisy, he suddenly feels trapped. Tom corners Gatsby and questions him "savagely"; his very words seem to "bite physically" (133). When Tom finally lets Gatsby out the door, he says there is nothing to worry about. With Daisy beside him, he knows the pack has closed ranks.

That night, Gatsby waits in feline solitude outside Daisy's window, "standing there in the moonlight, watching over nothing" (146). Nothing, in fact, is what Gatsby ends up with--he is found the next day, alone, floating in his own swimming pool, murdered. The dog-eat-dog world of the novel has devoured Jay Gatsby and his "incorruptible dream" (155).

WITHIN AND WITHOUT: NICK CARRAWAY

The distinction between character and personality suggested from the earliest pages of *The Great Gatsby* reveals just how fully Gatsby as a romantic hero is Nick's creation. Character as defined by Nick is essentially private; personality appears in public performance. This is an important reversal of the realist tradition ... , in which character—the fullest realization of an individual—lies precisely in the public, historical interplay of private impulses and social conventions. But in *The Great Gatsby* an individual's essential qualities remain forever hidden. Fitzgerald makes it clear that to know another person in any substantial way lies somewhere between a leap of imaginative faith and the sheerly impossible. . Carraway's entire relationship with Gatsby depends on his efforts to translate the mysterious man's dramatic gestures into a revelation of their hidden significance:

If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life. 2

Nick's interpretive imagination is thus at work from the outset. The conditional 'if' emphasizes the process; on to a skeleton of public gestures Nick fleshes a Gatsby, someone whose essential romantic hopefulness is expressed in his behaviour. Were any other figure in the novel to tell his story, to interpret the same gestures, however, Gatsby might well appear as a bootlegger living under an alias on Long Island, rather than the romantic hero we in fact encounter.

Much the same creative, interpretive impulse operates between other characters in the novel; Gatsby himself transforms Daisy's calculated dance—her everlasting freshness and gaiety, the music and extravagance of her voice—into the object of his dream. As our relation to Gatsby is mediated by Nick, so our perspective on Daisy is divided, with Gatsby performing as a narrator of her splendour, while Nick provides a less enchanted estimation. Marius Bewley makes a similar point:

Daisy Buchanan exists at two well-defined levels in the novel. She is what she is—but she exists at the level of Gatsby's vision of her. 3

It is important to add that even what Daisy 'is' emerges only through Nick's own private interpretation. . .

As Fitzgerald's characters struggle to fathom each other, nevertheless, they must trust in a faithful relation between personality and character. Yet early in *The Great Gatsby* Daisy demonstrates that no such harmony is necessary. Sitting with Nick on the front porch of her house, she makes a grand and fashionable speech of disillusion.

'You see I think everything's terrible anyhow,' she went on in a convinced way. "Everybody thinks so—the most advanced people. And I know. I've been everywhere and seen everything and done everything." Her eyes flashed around her in a defiant way, rather like Tom's, and she laughed with thrilling scorn. "Sophisticated—God, I'm sophisticated!"

The instant her voice broke off, ceasing to compel my attention, my belief, I felt the basic insincerity of what she had said. It made me uneasy, as though the whole evening had been a trick of some sort to exact a contributory emotion from me. I waited, and sure

enough, in a moment she looked at me with an absolute smirk on her lovely face, as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged. (p. 21)

Daisy lacks any meaningful integrity between self and gesture. And Gatsby, therefore, can never fully fathom her; he is too naive. His gestures and persona are too honestly an expression of the romantic self-image he has modelled himself on— despite the submerged identity of James Gatz—for him to understand Daisy's selfishness and charming duplicity. Although Gatsby's personality may bear an honest relation to his private intentions, we must remember that the Gatsby we are discussing is largely Carraway's creation. If we sense something of Gatsby's hidden nature, an intimate knowledge Fitzgerald would deny is ever fully valid, it is because Carraway believes in the sympathetic understanding he has, at the last, for Gatsby. The sensibilities of Nick's own private character translate the public spectacle of Gatsby's personality into an apparent three-dimensionality. Nick responds to Gatsby's ludicrous poses and sentimental clichés and immense egoism with imaginative sympathy because he believes these traits are born of a romantic hopefulness that he shares.

From their first meeting, Nick translates Gatsby's gestures with authority, as if his response were singularly attuned to Gatsby's intended effect.

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. Precisely at that point it vanished—and I was looking at an elegant young roughneck, a year or two over thirty, whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd. (p. 47)

Gatsby's exotic behaviour is always at the threshold between the grand and the absurd. . . In Gatsby's dramatic behaviour W. J. Harvey discovers not simply a typical egoistic self-proclamation, but an articulation, even a partial, symbolic fulfillment, of Gatsby's dream.

What we remember about [Gatsby] is not the restlessness or the drifting but 'an unbroken series of successful gestures' ... above all, Gatsby stretching out his arms towards the green light that is the vain promise of his future. We remember these formal poses as something theatrical or religious, but they are poses, moments of suspended time, something static and as such are the stylistic equivalents of Gatsby's attempt to impose his dream on reality, his effort to make the ever-rolling stream stand still. 4

An essential element of Gatsby's dream, therefore, and indeed of the romantic impulse itself, is the pursuit of a transcendent significance outside of society and beyond the mutability of history. The fact that we remember Gatsby's gestures outside of the narrative flow of events is evidence of how Gatsby and Carraway are truly in league: Gatsby poses and Carraway paints the picture, capturing the instant. . . . However, Gatsby's extravagance is given form and meaning only in Nick's imagination; he comes alive when Nick first glimpses the intensity of his dream. That intimation arises without Gatsby himself even present, as Jordan Baker reveals the history of his affair with Daisy.

'Gatsby bought that house so that Daisy would be just across the bay.' Then it had not been merely the stars to which he had aspired on that June night. He came alive to me, delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendor. (p. 72)

As Harvey points out, Carraway recalls Gatsby in a series of photographic poses, each representing an aspect of Gatsby's romantic, idealized self-image. But Jordan's story reveals the key to translating the static tableaux. Not until then does Nick understand the significance of his first view of his neighbour standing in the darkness, arms stretched across the bay. The gesture acquires meaning only through the interpretation of an observer, someone whose own character provides a touchstone for understanding. 5

Nick responds powerfully to the bare suggestion of Gatsby's dream. He is drawn to Gatsby and repelled because of the paradoxical impulses within himself as much as by the inconsistencies of the other's nature. Throughout the course of the tale Nick remains one foot in the settlement of conventional society, one foot in the wilderness with this extraordinary fellow. He is anchored to a world of chronological time and mutability, to values that are fundamentally social. Yet he is drawn imaginatively to a figure who repudiates both time and an identity defined by the community. Nick's dilemma is similar to that of narrators in such novels as *Wuthering Heights* and *The Scarlet Letter*, who straddle the traditions of realism and romanticism. They are poised between the values of the community and the creative defiance of a rebellious hero. Nick's own form of heroism, when he too becomes a narrator, will be to synthesize these apparently disparate impulses within his vision of general irony. He will avow the value of Gatsby's imagination and energy and his yearning for significance, while also affirming a code of fundamental decencies that makes human intercourse meaningful. Yet despite his allegiance to this code, Nick will have kicked himself free of the immediate social world in a way narrators before Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* never did.

IV

Nick's initial reading of Gatsby's dream senses no great mythic heroism; the fact of the dream, rather, merely suggests a meaningful pattern where before there had existed 'purposeless splendor'. Yet he seems to grasp at once that they have something in common, as if all young men have worshipped, or dreamed of worshipping an extraordinary woman. Certainly Fitzgerald's earlier fiction repeats the pattern often enough to suggest it as a universal truth.

Fitzgerald's stories also anticipate the way in which Gatsby's dream extends beyond any worldly object. Dexter Green, in 'Winter Dreams', before he focuses his desires on winning Judy Jones, is a middle-class boy with ambition and powerful, though vague yearnings. . . Gatsby pursues the fulfillment of his dreams relentlessly through the years. And the reunion of Gatsby and Daisy in Nick's cottage hints at the revelation that Daisy is the object of a dream that has transcended her.

'If it wasn't for the mist we could see your home across the bay,' said Gatsby. 'You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of your dock.'

Daisy put her arm through his abruptly, but he seemed absorbed in what he had just said. Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. (p. 84)

Characteristically, Nick qualifies his interpretation with 'possibly'. The tableau is presented, Gatsby and Daisy arm in arm, he suddenly wistful and distant. The meaning of that tableau is drawn intuitively by

Nick, and Gatsby's hidden character fleshed out in Nick's imagination that bit more. With this scene Nick begins to recognize that the contradictions in this other man may partly be due to a dream that has longed to reach beyond the physical reality of its object. Daisy is a flawed though extraordinary creature, as Nick well knows; she can hardly live up to the conception of Gatsby's imagination. For he desires, ultimately, an object that will glorify him, opening before him a path to transcendent significance. Daisy is unequal to that task, being very much a creature of this world. And this further explains the paradox apparent in Gatsby; though his impulse may be romantic and lofty, his quest has led him into a fallen world. In pursuit of Daisy he has conquered society's financial mysteries, but on its own terms, and he has been stained.

The dream is also limited by the dreamer. It is not simply that Daisy, a flesh and blood 'fetish', 7 cannot live up to the enormity of Gatsby's hopes, nor that the waste land that encompasses East Egg, West Egg, and Manhattan as well as the Valley of Ashes is corrupt. The vaguely platonic dream, as Nick senses it, transcends Gatsby. It is something nobler than the egoism of his imagination and the absurd expression he gives it. The immense intensity of the dream, after all, has been shaped by the imagination of seventeen-year-old James Gatz, a conception to which Jay Gatsby remains ever faithful. Like Jim and Ashburnham, like Robert Cohn in *The Sun Also Rises*, Gatsby's romantic self-image is founded on adventure stories; his father will bring to his son's funeral the copy of Hopalong Cassidy in which Jimmy Gatz inscribed a schedule for his self-improvement. The categories of James Gatz's imagination can only be inadequate to shape the dream's full glory.

In creating a portrait of Gatsby and in trying to explain his own sympathy for the man, Nick Carraway must himself attempt to impose form on Gatsby's dream, to articulate its beauty and energy and value, without deadening it within the constraints of language. We can recall the similar struggle of Marlow and Dowell to impose form and meaning on tales that apparently deny all form. Both Nick's ambivalence towards Gatsby and the inevitable disjunction between the ideal and the material world are further reflected in the ways he fashions a suggestion of the dream into language. Carraway reports Gatsby's intimate confessions using three separate strategies precisely to heighten the manifold paradoxes. The first is the straightforward quotation of Gatsby's own words.

Gatsby's failure of language is another manifestation of the dream's adolescent conception. He is clumsy with language; his diction and images also belong to boyhood adventure fiction. And too, the flow of simple communication doesn't easily conform to staged poses. When he perseveres in trying to match words to gestures, he repeatedly crosses the threshold between the mysterious and the absurd. 8

...'I lived like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe— Paris, Venice, Rome—collecting jewels, chiefly rubies, hunting big game, painting a little, things for myself only, and trying to forget something very sad that had happened to me long ago.'

With an effort I managed to restrain my incredulous laughter. The very phrases were worn so threadbare that they evoked no image except that of a turbaned 'character' leaking sawdust at every pore as he pursued a tiger through the Bois de Boulogne. (p. 61)

By thus reporting Gatsby's speeches verbatim and then criticizing their heavy handed cliches, Nick stakes out one dimension in Gatsby—with these brief glimpses the full, exotic, impossibility of such a creature becomes apparent. Indeed, the extravagance of this passage distances the reader so that he is taken aback by Nick's abrupt conversion moments later on seeing Gatsby's medal from Montenegro: 'Then it was all true' (p. 62).

Yet absurdity is, of course, only one element of Nick's portrait of Gatsby. A second method is simple paraphrasis; Nick translates the gist of Gatsby's speech without being bound by the artificial constrictions of the other's syntax and diction.

He talked a lot about the past, and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy. His life had been confused and disordered since then, but if he could once return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was.... (p. 99, Fitzgerald's ellipsis)

Nick's paraphrasing here keeps absurdity at a distance. Gatsby is not entirely unaware of the tyranny of change. The intensity of his first great love has shorn him of something of himself, some essence of vitality that nurtured his belief in romantic possibility. This narrative strategy conveys both the strength and pathos of Gatsby's yearning, along with Nick's own ironic awareness that, as he has said to Gatsby moments before, 'You can't repeat the past'.

Immediately after this last passage, Carraway abandons Gatsby's words entirely. He transforms into lyric the story of Gatsby in Louisville five years earlier.

Now it was a cool night with that mysterious excitement in it which comes at the two changes of the year. The quiet lights in the houses were humming out into the darkness and there was a stir and bustle among the stars. Out of the corner of his eye Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalks really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees—he could climb to it, if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder. (pp. 99 -100)

Clearly this is more than a matter of substituting new words for Gatsby's—the perspective, the conception, as well as the language, are Nick's. He has, in fact, stolen away dream from dreamer, and reshaped it according to the possibilities of his own imagination. Here, when Gatsby's dream seems most vivid, we discover to what extent both Gatsby and his dream are Nick's creations. He can speak as Gatsby cannot, achieving lyric intensity rather than empty cliché, for as narrator he

possesses at once an ironic detachment from and a sympathetic bond to Gatsby's romantic impulse.

But finally what Nick cannot say—and does not attempt—is the most potent testament that the two men share a dream that transcends either of them. Nick, like Gatsby, cannot circumscribe its energy, the vitality of all youth and hope and desire, within the boundaries of language. Instead . . . he suggests the dream's deeper significance.

Through all he said, even through his appalling sentimentality, I was reminded of something—an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words, that I had heard somewhere a long time ago. For a moment a phrase tried to take shape in my mouth and my lips parted like a dumb man's, as though there was more struggling upon them than a wisp of startled air. But they made no sound, and what I had almost remembered was uncommunicable forever. (p. 100)

Nick acknowledges the greatness of the dream by not constraining it, not fashioning it fully into articulateness. Yet by evoking the dream through language, he achieves what Gatsby cannot—he

translates the ideal into a medium of this world, affirming its value, and sustaining it.

V

Just as the ideal cannot be brought into the physical universe without being tainted, Gatsby cannot survive in a world indifferent to his dream and unable to comprehend him. With Daisy, the object that has sustained his dream and given his life direction, lost forever, Gatsby's personality collapses. It will be Nick as narrator and hero who revives the dream and sets it in juxtaposition to a modern society always its foe.

Certainly Gatsby generates and bears his own fate; he has no place in a world that grants him everything but what he desires most, the right it cannot grant—to change time and history. Like a great carnival with tents struck and costumes shed, he ceases entirely to exist as far as society is concerned. Only Nick, acting according to the moral gyroscope of his identity, that code of fundamental decencies, insists on Gatsby's significance, his meaning as a human being, if not the transcendent significance Jimmy Gatz had dreamed of.

[A]s he lay in his house and didn't move or breathe or speak, hour upon hour, it grew upon me that I was responsible, because no one else was interested—interested, I mean, with that intense personal interest to which every one has some vague right at the end. (p. 145)

The refusal of all the crowd who had swirled through Gatsby's parties to recognize such human responsibilities is finally more damning in Nick's eyes than any collective guilt for Gatsby's fate. All that holds this society together—and not just Tom and Daisy as representative of the very rich—is a vast, careless, self-interested association. No code of solidarity to the social weal, or moral responsibility, or human dignity, retains any forceful imperative.

The indifference of society itself to standards of human behaviour destroys Nick's faith in what Marlow called 'a sovereign code of conduct'. Carraway must henceforth wrestle with the fact that any such code is arbitrary, artificial, and, to a certain degree, an illusion. Right action, which in the innocence of youth had seemed automatic and unquestionable, becomes a matter of deliberate choice. Carraway's choice to assume responsibility for Gatsby is a response to the indifferent, to Meyer Wolfsheim and to Daisy, to the East and to the universe—a clear, unabashed claim of his own moral identity.

Of course, Gatsby has been no more committed than other members of Eastern society to a common code of shared values. While eagerly pursuing his own glory he could hardly be distracted with moral imperatives. Gatsby's physical existence, his methods of surviving and conquering, all the tools he has used in his quest, are as corrupt as any of the creatures around him.

Carraway's rejection of the East for its irresponsibility, therefore, is a rejection as well of that side of Gatsby's nature which. . . asserts the appetite and significance of the ego in disregard of larger forms of human relations. His enduring ambivalence towards Gatsby is not due solely to the conflict between the dream and the corrupt environment in which it is expressed, but to this essential aspect of the romantic impulse as well—that it celebrates the self alone, not the values that make community meaningful.

Earlier I argued that the underlying motive of Gatsby's dream is an urge towards personal transcendent significance: a defiant I am, or better, I mean, hurled out into a universe of turmoil and indifference. Even

as he repudiates its anti-social nature, Nick, as narrator, affirms Gatsby's dream with his own effort to create a meaningful tale that will endure. Gatsby sought to set himself free of worldly, temporal constraints. Nick's heroism is to succeed, at least partly, where Gatsby fails. The victory of the narrative itself is analogous to and greater than Gatsby's characteristic gestures or poses. W. J. Harvey suggested that those static poses were a "stylistic equivalent" to Gatsby's goal, an existence momentarily free of time. Nick's narrative is a more enduring stylistic equivalent of what the dream promised—an existence outside of time, immutable, brought to life in the eyes of an audience.

The narrative is also the culmination of what Nick has begun by accepting responsibility for Gatsby. By telling the tale Nick assumes a further responsibility: for the dream itself. His narrative circumscribes its romantic egoism, while celebrating its vitality and faith, its capacity for wonder, and its determination to create significance. And the narrative fulfils that determination. It insists on the form—and the meaning—of a tale that has apparently ended in disaster and chaos. Out of the confusion following Gatsby's death, and the hypocrisy and indifference of New York society, emerges Nick Carraway's moral character, manifested in the controlling irony that shapes the tale and answers the chaos.

In nineteenth-century novels of moral education, proof of the hero's new character is borne out by his willing integration into the social fabric of time and labour and responsibility. Nick Carraway's new identity, however, involves something other than a synthesis of his private values and desires with the external realities of the social environment; his modern form of heroism synthesizes the essential impulses of nineteenth-century heroes of realism with the romantic heroism of a Gatsby. For his actions after Gatsby's death are directed by a pervading recognition of general irony which steadfastly holds true to a social code of human responsibilities, affirms the romantic urge towards individual significance, and yet recognizes as well the radical relativism of all values and dreams.

Rather than plunging once more into the turmoil of life in New York, Nick repudiates it, retreating West. Yet to what precisely he has returned remains an enigma. . .Carraway as he speaks seems isolated from the immediate flux of life by the distance of his own narrative frame, reflecting the ironic detachment of his soul. He too has been partly lamed by his acquired sensibility. What had been a characteristic stance of being 'within and without' has become, we sense, more radical. Nick at the conclusion seems singularly 'without'. When he speaks of the Mid-West it is not of the present in which he finds himself, but of the past, a memory that exists outside of time much as does the story he tells.

That's my Middle West—not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns, but the thrilling returning trains of my youth, and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow. I am part of that, a little solemn with the feel of those long winters, a little complacent from growing up in the Carraway house in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family's name. (p. 155)

Having reconsecrated those human values passed on to him by his father, Nick seeks to return to a traditional society in which they remain the unconscious sinews of community. He pursues a quest similar to Gatsby's after all—a journey back towards an innocence and security now lost, towards something of himself that has vanished. His West is a memory of childhood. Carraway, again like Gatsby, wishes that all that has happened, not just this past summer but since the War, can be redeemed with an act of will and spirit. At the same time, however, he is well aware that such a wish is folly. The heroic urge for transcendent significance remains potent—impels him to speak—even as he is 'borne back ceaselessly into the past' (p. 159).

Carraway has been changed. . . . How comfortably a spiritual orientation of general irony can meld into the work-a-day reality of the West remains an open question. Nick gives us no suggestion of what his new life has brought—as if he, though not the rest of the world, has remained 'at a sort of moral attention' until the tale is told.