

Gatsby's Foil: Analyzing a Parallel Relationship

DECEMBER 2, 2018

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An initial reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* might suggest that the relationship between its narrator, Nick Carraway, and his love interest, Jordan Baker, is merely peripheral to the central relationship of Gatsby and Daisy. A more thorough analysis of these figures, however, reveals a series of intrinsic inconsistencies within both Nick's and Jordan's characters as well as their relationship with one another; these vacillations and contradictions serve as an imperative foil to Gatsby's unadulterated single-mindedness.

Though many of Gatsby's qualities can be debated, his relentlessness in his pursuit of Daisy cannot. From the moment Daisy enters into Gatsby's life, he has only one purpose: obtaining Daisy; he seeks after her as his own personal "Holy Grail" (149). The cost is irrelevant to him, as is anything that stands in his way, including morality. In reference to the extravagant mansion Gatsby purchases, Jordan tells Nick at one point how "Gatsby bought that house so that Daisy would be just across the bay" (78). Then, within this "house," Gatsby's great monument to Daisy, he hosts lavish and fanciful parties to attract her attention so she might "wander into one of his parties, some night...but she never did" (79). Gatsby's infatuation with and obsessive pursuit of Daisy is incontrovertible; it is against this unbending resolve that Nick and Jordan are contrasted in their changeable and noncommittal relationship.

Fitzgerald, utilizing Nick as the narrator, sets the stage from the initial page of the novel by giving the reader a window into Nick's internal contradictions. The narrator first tells the reader how he is "inclined to reserve all judgments" of other people, describing this posture as some kind of noble trait he possesses (1). In the same sentence, however, he goes on to explain that this habit of being non-judgmental has made him "the victim of not a few veteran bores," which is a rather unkind judgment for one being so apparently non-judgmental (1). Later, as Nick is clearly falling in love with Jordan, he tells himself he is not in love with her—sad attempt to maintain the cool and distant persona he shows to the world...even himself (57). It is clear throughout the novel that Nick holds a rather high opinion of himself that elevates him above those around him. Though he claims to be "one of the few honest people" he has ever known, his refusal to be honest, even with himself regarding his feelings for Jordan, demonstrates how false this assertion is (59). This self-deception eliminates even the possibility of being honest with her on the subject. Additionally, Nick pursues Jordan without informing her he is already in a long-distance relationship of some kind "back home," obviously undermining his claims to personal virtue and honesty (58). Throughout the entirety of the novel, Nick continues to affirm his indifference and, more subtly, his moral superiority. Nick's words and actions towards Jordan, however, repeatedly show how the very same lack of integrity that characterizes the majority of the other figures in the novel has likewise corrupted his own life.

For her part, Jordan is no better, as she displays a similar moral ambiguity and vacillates in her words and actions. Throughout her life, she has intentionally avoided men who seem to be intelligent or discerning, expressing her unwillingness "to endure being at a disadvantage" (58). As a result of her insecurities, Jordan falls into a lifestyle of habitual deception, confessing to being "incurably dishonest" (58). Those habits enable her to maintain her own indifference to the world around her, much like Nick experiences. This aloofness, acting as a barrier to protect her, also extends to the people in the world around her, including anyone toward whom she may have legitimate romantic feelings. Surprisingly, Jordan fails to recognize Nick as a threat to her world of controlled sameness, and as a result, allows herself to care about him. During an interesting conversation about her driving ability, Nick remarks that Jordan is a terrible driver and should be more careful, to which she responds by saying that she *is* careful (58). Nick flatly disagrees, and Jordan then contradicts herself by admitting, "Well, other people are [careful]" (58). She likes Nick expressly because she believes he is not one of those careless types of people who would be likely to get into an accident with her (58). This is an especially remarkable confession from Jordan considering her typically cynical perspective of the world—one that demonstrates her trust placed in Nick. In this, she contradicts her own nature yet again by trusting him and continues to exemplify this pervasive vacillation.

Together, Nick and Jordan have an array of inconsistencies and contradictions that demonstrate their characters as foils to Gatsby even further. The day after Daisy accidentally kills Myrtle Wilson, Jordan calls Nick on the phone (154). During this conversation, they both have very conflicting positions toward each other that change even in the middle of the conversation. Jordan tells Nick that she felt he was not very "nice" to her the previous night, but says she wants to see him anyway (155). Nick asks her how it could possibly matter whether or not he was "nice" to her given the circumstances, but then adds that he also wants to see her (155). However, the vacillation between them takes over; they do not meet at all; and Nick apparently hangs up on her. Each of the instances previously discussed demonstrates the patterns of instability in both Nick and Jordan, ultimately culminating in their final exchange.

The last conversation between Nick and Jordan clearly displays the finality of the damage wrought by such self-deception and transient commitment. Earlier in the novel, Nick displays an apparent indifference to hanging up on Jordan, but the tension in their final conversation makes it clear that he does indeed care. Jordan, at first, similarly feigns indifference as she informs Nick that she is now engaged to another man; she then tips her hand as she professes that she "doesn't give a damn" about him now (177). By this overplayed statement of apparent dismissal, she is actually displaying her vulnerability and how hurt she truly is by his having broken up with her over the telephone. Jordan is able to see things more clearly, and she brings their relationship back full circle to the discussion about her poor driving skills (177). In choosing to trust Nick, who turns out to be just one more of the careless people she always hated, her own carelessness is unveiled before her. She verbalizes that she made a mistake and challenges Nick by saying, "I thought you were rather an honest, straightforward person. I thought it was your secret pride" (177). Nick responds with a profound and revealing statement: "I'm thirty... I'm five years too old to lie to myself and call it honor" (177). Finally, the conclusion of the novel reveals the main characters' internal flaw of self-deception—not in a manner that would bring them back together, but just enough for them to acknowledge their errors before permanently parting ways. In this final exchange, Nick and Jordan play out the last and ultimate contradiction to their entire relationship; it is only during their very last moment as they sever their connection entirely that they are finally and truly honest with one another. In myriad ways, they are clearly, with all their vacillating contradictions, a darkly reflected image of Gatsby in his vain but purely steadfast attempts to achieve his dream wrapped around Daisy.

In this reverse imaging of Gatsby, Nick, and Jordan, together and individually, serve as foils to him. Gatsby certainly does seek his own happiness; he pursues Daisy for all the same selfish reasons as do the rest of the cast of characters in the novel, but he does so with reckless abandon and a resolute focus that does not waver, no matter the obstacles. He gives himself entirely to the pursuit of his dream. Despite the honor Gatsby supposedly exemplifies, in reality he is following the same selfish course as all the other characters—just in a different way.

In a similar fashion, Nick and Jordan pursue their own happiness with an identical egocentric motivation. Unlike Gatsby's pure, unadulterated and passionate drive, however, Nick and Jordan utilize an internal duplicity in the façade of their indifference—a shield meant to protect them from the meaninglessness that consumes their superficial microcosm of the wider, aimless world. It is interesting to note that Nick describes Jordan as a "clean, hard, limited person, who dealt in universal skepticism," which he sees as a compliment (79). The two of them subconsciously live at war within themselves in their noncommittal and intrinsic vacillation—they are cynical and cosmopolitan on the one hand, but vulnerable and human, desiring a meaningful relationship, on the other. After witnessing the chaotic confrontation between Gatsby and Tom Buchanan, Nick proudly states that "there was Jordan beside me, who, unlike Daisy, was too wise ever to carry well-forgotten dreams from age to age" (135). Even here, Nick subconsciously places himself and Jordan above the foolishness of Gatsby and Daisy, though their ends are ultimately the same. For all of Nick and Jordan's mental gymnastics and emotional contortions to protect themselves, the same emptiness the other characters of Fitzgerald's cast experience is their only reward in the end. Regardless which path one might choose, whether attempting to guard oneself and avoid all the "careless" people in the world, or plunging in completely, holding nothing back, the outcome is the same. Whether it is an oblivion that ends with a violent explosion, like Gatsby, or an oblivion that ends in silence and heart-rending regret, like Nick and Jordan, the final result is the same empty oblivion either way. The pursuit of happiness in a world of superficiality will never lead to anything less than the abortion of dreams and the disembowelment of hope.

Work Cited

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York, Scribner, 2004.



Previous

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