

Narrators' Credibility: A Comparative Study of the Narrative Technique in Bronte's *Withering Heights*, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract—The debate on the reliability of the story teller or narrator in fiction writing is so intense to the degree of controversy. Ever since the early stages of fiction writing, most of the novelists seek new methods and techniques in writing their stories. Some of them have achieved success and became known worldwide, and their works have become masterpieces and essential landmarks in the world of fiction. These works have been among the curricular subjects taught in the most esteemed universities in the world. These eminent works have mostly been tackled thematically by reason of the novelty and importance of their themes, yet there are only a handful critiques on their technical aspects, style, diction being used, or narrative methods. This is a comparative study of some of such works like F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* in comparison with some other works such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Emily Bronte's *Withering Heights*.

Keywords—Withering heights, Heart of darkness, The Great Gatsby, Nick, Nelly, Marlow.

I. INTRODUCTION

In their reviews and critical essays, some critics fail to distinguish between certain factors related to the art of narration. It is significant to differentiate between two terms: Novel and story. According to Ian Milligan (Milligan, 1984. p. 94), the former is the finished work which the novelist begins and finishes its form, content, and the moral lesson behind it. The story refers the events being narrated in the novel. It can be written in a chronological sequence or otherwise (Milligan, 1984. p. 94).

It is common to find novelists narrating their stories in the first person without any need to another narrator, whereas others try their best to insert a narrator within the characters of the story. The latter's reasons to do this vary from a novelist to another. Joseph Conrad, for instance, uses Marlow as a narrator in three of his major works: *Heart of Darkness* (1899), *Lord Jim* (1900), and *Chance* (1912) (Wake, 2007. p. 1) for political reasons. Conrad's major criticism was against European imperialism practiced in their colonies overseas; so, fearing from persecution, he

deployed Marlow as an eyewitness from the heart of the events.

The purpose is different with Emily Bronte's writer, Mr. Lockwood of *Withering Heights*. Bronte needed a masculine writer to let her feminine voice hide behind it, for it was weird to have a female writer at her time. Using pseudo names by many female novelists in the 18th-19th century were quite common. So is the case with George Eliot, Jane Austin, and others besides Emily. However, she gave her voice to Ellen Dean, the female narrator of the story to convey her attitudes through (Winnifrith, 1977. p. 46).

Nevertheless, by doing so, it is intended to have an objective eyewitness from the core of the events so that the novelists may rid themselves of imposing subjective views whether to the events or characters. In 1925, F. Scott Fitzgerald published his *The Great Gatsby* with a new method of narrative (Mizener, 1966. p. 46-7). Having scrutinized the narrative flaws in both Emily Bronte's and Joseph Conrad's used narrative techniques, Fitzgerald focused on the narrator's character much more than the concept of the narrators' objective views. It is crucial for the literary

reader to discriminate between objectivity (or reliability) and credibility in telling a story.

Those who are interested in the realm of fiction know for sure that fiction and history have almost the same aspects regarding characters, time, place, causes and effects, etc. The difference between them lies in fiction's subjectivity and non-fiction's (history, biography, etc.) "supposed" objectivity. Therefore, novelists try to apply objectivity to their narrative so that the story is told by an outsider or a minor character that happens to witness the events and tells the story later on. This method is basically done by inserting figures inside the events for no significant purpose more than using them as tools to tell us the story from inside.

The sole purpose of finding a narrator to tell the story from inside the events is an imitation of history telling in an attempt to apply make-believe to the story. Critics may find the narrative in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is transferred among the narrators from one hand to another. Lockwood writes, Ellen Dean narrates what she sees or what she hears from Catherine, Heathcliff, Joseph, and others. She is present when Heathcliff is first brought to Wuthering Heights, and it is she who closes the last image of Heathcliff's body as his mouth is wide open and his eyes gazing with horror in a grotesque scene (Winniffrith, 1977. p. 47).

The idea of applying objectivity to the narrative falls short with a real study of these works. All the works referred to share the same features in narration. We can hardly find any of these works purely objective or reliable. This is partly because the authors give their voices to the narrators to convey their messages, assessments, and view-points, on the one hand, and to lead the reader to accept their concepts on another.

When Catherine Earnshaw of *Wuthering Heights*, unaware of Heathcliff's presence behind her, says "it would degrade me to marry Heathcliff," Ellen is the one (or the last one) to see him overhearing and accordingly withdrawing silently out, but she lies to Catherine and says it was Joseph. Ellen is there most of the way, but Ellen does not give judgments or make analysis and hides facts and lies (Brontë, 2009. p. 65). So regarding objectivity, unlike Conrad's Marlow of *Heart of Darkness*, Ellen is objective. Yet still, the narrative technique of *Wuthering Heights* suffers from credibility of the narration. The reader hardly knows anything about Mr. Lockwood, the literate story writer except that he is the tenant who hired Thrushcross Grange from its landlord, Heathcliff, who does not show any kind of hospitality to Lockwood. However, in the second visit and due to the bad weather, he spends the night in Catherine's bedroom at Wuthering Heights where he experiences a nightmarish dream of Catherine's ghost patting at the window to let her in. Eventually, Lockwood catches cold and falls sick. During the period of his recovery, Ellen Dean who was looking after the mansion begins narrating to him the story of the first and second generations including Heathcliff, Catherine, Edgar, and Isabelle. Therefore, we do not know anything more about Lockwood. The authentic writer should gain the readers' trust through self-identification in the first place (Brontë, 2009. pp. 10-12).

On the other hand, the credibility of Ellen Dean, the illiterate housekeeper, is also a matter of question. Ellen tells the story with a too brilliant artistry to believe. Critics often raise the question how an illiterate housemaid can tell this story in such an artistic way that most educated people cannot match. Giving a housekeeper her voice to express her spectacle to the reader is a serious flaw committed by Brontë.

Just the same in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, we find the story is written by an unidentified anonymous writer who writes what he hears from Marlow, the steamboat captain who narrates his experience in the jungles of Congo, which then was a Belgian colony. The only difference between *Wuthering Heights* and *Heart of Darkness* is that the writer's name is given in the former, whereas in the latter, the writer is anonymous (Jeffares, 2009. p. XXI).

II. DISCUSSION

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald's main contribution is his new method of narration, and new objective-subjective narrator which is novel in the world of storytelling. Most of the novelists endeavor to apply objectivity to the narrator. Emily Brontë's narration in *Wuthering Heights* shifts from the first person, Lockwood, to the second person, Ellen Dean, and then to a few other persons such as Joseph, Heathcliff, Catherine, and others where and when Ellen was absent in the actual events but "heard" them say so.

In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Charlie Marlow, whose nickname is mentioned on only two occasions, is the most celebrated of Conrad's narrator characters. Conrad delineates this character-narrator as "not in the least typical." Marlow is the voice behind not only "*Heart of Darkness*" (1899) but also behind his novels *Lord Jim* (1900) and *Chance* (1912). Marlow is the real narrator of all these stories which are recorded to us by an unidentified writer; besides, we learn little beyond the fact that Marlow has some obscure knowledge of sea life and nothing more. Hence, our writer is not Marlow and it is not in the first person; in fact, Marlow is referred to as "he" (Wake, 2007. p. 3). In fact, Marlow is the leading character of *Heart of Darkness*, and it is his experience through the African jungle. In this case, Marlow is the narrator and leading character of the novella, but not protagonist (Wake, 2007. p. 5). Fitzgerald's Nick is the writer-narrator-character of "*The great Gatsby*." Nick writes, narrates, describes, remarks, and plays significant roles in some major events of the story and again he is not the protagonist; the protagonist is the titular character Jay Gatsby.

Marlow tries to tell the story from an objective angle. Again, Conrad transfers his voice to Marlow who is a captain of a steamboat that penetrates into the African jungles of Congo. He starts telling his story to some unidentified passengers aboard a boat on the Thames. Still, the readers want to know Marlow's social, intellectual, and educational background before reading his story; the thing that is unknown till the end of the novel. Unlike Lockwood-Ellen case of Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Marlow's story

is written by an anonymous writer whom we have zero knowledge. But whereas Lockwood and Ellen have no particular or subjective stands, Marlow himself is the leading character, and the experience is his own. Kurtz's character is rather symbolic and minor compared to Marlow's. Therefore, the narrative technique of *Heart of Darkness* lacks credibility. Hence, Conrad's usage of Marlow as his spokesman is fragile. The comparison between the narrative techniques used in these two works and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* goes to the favor of the last one.

Some critics question the reliability of Nick Carraway as a narrator because of his prejudice toward Gatsby and against his rivals (Lehan, 1966. p. 23). To trust a narrator, there are two aspects that the reader may want to know and believe: The narrator's personal, educational, and conscientious credentials as a qualified person to be fit to the task. The second aspect is to tell the story as it happens regardless of the attitudes or feelings that the narrator may have.

When we come to compare between the three narrators and the writers' narrative method, we find that, unlike Bronte and Conrad, Fitzgerald gives Nick the superiority to believe him whether socially, culturally, or educationally. The readers are told that Nick belongs to an established well-to-do family with historical background in the American Midwest. He is a graduate of the University of Yale (New Haven). He is a veteran of the Big War (WWI) who has come back disillusioned by the aftermath of that war; which means that he belongs to the same culture of Lost Generation as Jay Gatsby, and therefore, he feels restless and irritated during his stay with the family in the Midwest. Thus, Fitzgerald gives him the purpose for leaving his hometown toward the East, New York precisely to work in bond business in Wall Street. But that is not enough (Lehan, 1966. p. 21).

Nick Carraway is a far cousin of Daisy Buchanan in East Egg, and an old friend of Tom Buchanan, Daisy's husband ever since they were in the same university. Having rented a bungalow in West Egg, Nick becomes Gatsby's neighbor. His bungalow has "an eye sore" through which he can see both the Sound Lake and Gatsby's mansion. Furthermore, Nick as a character has some manners and mores; Nick as drunk is different than Nick when sober. When sober he sees things objectively, and when he is drunk, he sees things beyond the limits of objectivity. Here, he gives his personal opinions and feelings openly to the readers (Rauf, 2016. p. 73).

By granting him with all these mobility, nobility, educational, and conscientious facilities, Fitzgerald acknowledges Nick Carraway as his spokesman. He gives Nick his voice not only to narrate the story, but also to deliver the due moral message. Hence, Nick is provided with all these facilities which Lockwood and Ellen of *Wuthering Heights* and Marlow and the unknown writer of *Heart of Darkness* are deprived of. The ideal narrator's second aspect to discuss is his objectivity. And here lies Fitzgerald's contribution to the art of storytelling.

The Great Gatsby's Nick begins the story in the first person with an advice from his late father saying:

To keep this advice in mind, Nick suffered so much during his youth and caused him a lot of unjust accusations by his

friends and colleagues at school. Then, he himself comes to confess that to stay objective and unprejudiced all the way is hard and "has its limits" (Fitzgerald, 1953. p. 1).

From the very beginning, Nick opens a new window for the art of narration; that he is going to be objective to a certain limit. Fitzgerald makes us as readers get indulged with Nick's views, impressions, and judgments as an active character not as a mere narrator like Lockwood, the visitor or Ellen, the housemaid. Nick plays a significant role in the events when he prepares for Gatsby's meeting with Daisy in his own bungalow. And through Nick's experience, feelings, descriptions, and attitudes, the readers build up their own experience toward or against the characters. Nick considers everyone in the story as a character even Gatsby, who is supposed to be a titular character; the personality or image about which the whole novel is written (Rauf, 2016, p. 74).

Hence, for the 1st time in the history of fiction, the code of the objective narrator is formally broken. It is Nick who describes his far cousin Daisy, our leading female character, "the moment she stopped speaking, I felt the insincerity of all what she said;" and "as if she and Tom [her husband] belonged to one of those secret societies." He dates Jordan Baker whom he can never trust because he believes her to be a crook. But when it comes to Gatsby, he juxtaposes two ambivalent descriptions: A negative impression which is objective, "Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction – Gatsby who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn;" then comes the positive one which is entirely subjective, "If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes 10,000 miles away" (Fitzgerald, 1953. pp. 1-4).

Nick delivers to us these two paradoxical impressions from the very beginning of the novel, even before the start of the story. By doing so, he announces two aspects; one, he is not purely objective; two he has two opposed ideas in his mind toward Gatsby. In fact, this is part of Fitzgerald's understanding of intelligence. In his autobiographical piece, "The Crack Up" he says, "The test of a first-rate intelligence is to have two opposed ideas in the mind in the same time, and still retain the ability to function" (Fitzgerald, *The Crackup*, 1965. p. 1)

Nick says he has been reserving judgments ever since his early youth, and he has the intention to go on like this until the speech turns into Gatsby, when he begins breaking the rule of the objective narrator, "Only Gatsby," and then he goes on to say that even after Gatsby's premature death (or assassination) everything went alright with him, so the problem is not with Gatsby, but "what preyed on Gatsby? What foul dust preyed on him in the wake of his dream?" Here, Nick identifies himself with Gatsby's image as the American Dream (Fitzgerald, 1953. p. 1).

Unlike Ellen of *Wuthering Heights* and Conrad's Marlow of *Heart of Darkness* who have been applied with poor educational background, Nick Carraway of *Gatsby* is provided by Fitzgerald with all the educational means together with sincerity and mobility facilities to enable him

to move, witness, and deliver judgments to all the events current to the time of his stay in New York. And for the past events, Fitzgerald uses some minor narrators to cover those events. So by saying so, Nick, declares his self-identification with Gatsby, the thing that is quite peculiar in the narrative technique. So how could the reader rely on a biased informer? Here lies Fitzgerald's outstanding technique to let the readers identify themselves with Nick and thus with Gatsby (Rauf, 2016, p. 72).

III. CONCLUSION

The similarity between the three authors' works is their quest to find an entirely objective narrator. Yet, as has already been discussed above, the quest is no more than that of the Holy Grail. The three examples given above prove the futility of the effort. All the narrators interfere, take part, and play roles in delivering or hiding events or that they give their personal subjective views openly such as Marlow of *Heart of Darkness* Ellen Dean of *Wuthering Heights*, and Nick of *The Great Gatsby*. The only difference is made by the last one.

Fitzgerald contributes to the narrative technique in two ways. The first one is that he focuses on the credibility of the narrator; the second is when he makes a public announcement of the death of the pure objective narrator. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald lets Nick to be an active character that is live from within the events, and an outsider beholder of the events the way best suits his method.

Besides the thematic richness of *The Great Gatsby*, its technical aspects are nonetheless even richer when the narrative methods and techniques are tackled as trends.

Hundreds of scholars have tackled Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* thematically; especially such themes such as the American Dream, the Jazz Age, restoration of the past, nostalgia, or the Wasteland, only a handful of them have dared go through it stylistically. Fitzgerald's main craftsmanship in this artistic piece of literature goes beyond its thematic topics. It basically lies in Fitzgerald's contribution to the art of fictional narration.

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