The Selectiveness of Nick Carraway

The Unreliable Narrator in
The Great Gatsby

**Course:** English for subject teachers 61-90 credits
**Individual Project (15 credits)**
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**Autumn 2018**
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Abstract: Many scholars have argued back and forth regarding the reliability of the narrator Nick Carraway in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s most well-known novel The Great Gatsby. Nick’s attention to detail in his narrative is the element due to which many scholars argue in favour of his reliability. One of these scholars is Wayne C. Booth, who was the first that introduced reliability and unreliability, and marked Nick as a reliable narrator. Nick’s account is a retrospective telling of events which happened two years earlier and Booth argues for Nick’s reliability because he provides the benefit of hindsight. However, in this essay, I will argue that Nick Carraway is an unreliable narrator as the consequence of his selectiveness that is visible in the narrative. Through Nick’s selectiveness, four categories are evident: concealment of information, censorship, memory, and drunkenness. As a result, these categories, alongside the central aspect of selectiveness, verify the suppression of the complete plot which Nick hides from the reader.

Keywords: Reliability, narratology, selectiveness, concealment, censorship, memory, drunkenness.
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1. Introduction

When telling a story, the narration is important to examine because the reader is experiencing the story through the narrator. In this case, the narrative technique is crucial to study because the reader is informed about the other characters, the protagonist’s views, feelings, and thoughts about the other characters and the events that are told. Narrators might win or maintain the trust of the reader, and the reader might believe in every exact detail that the narrator is revealing. Some narrators need to be objective when delivering information about events or experiences in order for the reader to believe that the narrator’s opinions will not influence his or her perception of the story. However, events, other characters or circumstances might influence the narrator’s views, and therefore they risk being subjective and subsequently influence the reader’s views. As Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle point out that, as readers, our perception of the text depends on the narrator’s reliability and objectivity (59).

The concept of reliability is defined by Cambridge Dictionary as “how accurate or able to be trusted someone or something is considered to be” (Reliability). One of the critics who first studied and introduced the concept of reliability of a narrator is Wayne Booth. In his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1983), he identifies a narrator as either being reliable or unreliable. The narrator is “reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), unreliable when he does not.” (158-159). Ansgar Nünning, on the other hand, adjusts Booth’s concept of reliability and states that reliability is connected to the text and the reader, instead of being connected to “the implied author’s norms” (158). Nünning writes the following: “Unreliable narrators are those whose perspective is in contradiction to the value and norm system of the whole text or to that of the reader” (87). James Phelan also extends Booth’s concept the ‘unreliable narrator’ in his book *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*
Windy Daniel (2005) and identifies the primary roles of a narrator as: “reporting, interpreting, and evaluating” (50). When narrators fail to complete the three roles by not interpreting, reporting or evaluating some parts of the story, they risk being unreliable. Reliability is a necessary tool for the reader to get valid information from the narrator and for the reader to have a good reading experience. Although it is known that some novels have fictional worlds with fictional narrators, it is still essential for the reader to be able to step into that world and to feel a certain type of belonging, thus engaging the reader. However, if the narrator delivers information that might make the reader question a fact, a situation, or a conversation, then this might risk the reader’s experience of being a part of that fictional world.

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby* set in the 1920s introduces the reader to the American lifestyle following World War I. It is considered one of the greatest novels that portrays the American Dream. The narrator, Nick Carraway, writes a book about his experience of moving to Long Island to start his life anew. There, he meets Jay Gatsby, his mysterious wealthy neighbour whom he begins spending time with and growing more curious about. The reason as to why Nick chose to write his book is not clearly conveyed, but it might lead the reader to think that he wrote it for therapeutic reasons, for Nick to come to terms with the events of Gatsby’s death. Nick might also have written the book for the reason to explain Gatsby’s story as he felt that Gatsby had only him as he wrote: “I found myself on Gatsby’s side, and alone” (104). Furthermore, Nick knew the fact that Gatsby was not the person who killed Mrs. Wilson, and felt that people viewed Gatsby as a murderer; therefore, he might have felt that the book would clear his conscience, because he did not reveal to the police the truth about Mrs. Wilson’s killer. Tom confronted Nick after a few months and said: “He ran over [Mrs. Wilson] like you’d run over a dog and never even stopped his car” (114). However, Nick did not respond to Tom’s accusation and he wrote instead: “There was nothing I could say, except the one unutterable fact that it wasn’t true” (114). Therefore, his
book might be the truth that Nick could not reveal at the time of the events. As a result, the
book that Nick writes is more about the life of Jay Gatsby, than his own life story. Due to the
fact that Nick’s account is a retrospective telling of the events which happened two years
earlier, it makes the narration of the book crucial to interpret since Nick did not write his book
straightaway after the events when his memory was still recent and un tarnished. In other
words, Nick writes a book named *The Great Gatsby* where he tells his version of the summer
when he meets Gatsby and learns about his life, but he writes it two years after, where the
memories might not be as clear, as writing a book immediately after the events. Nick is also
selective with the information that he provides in the book, where he selects events or
conversations that he wants to include and conceals the ones he wants to avoid writing about.
These concealed conversations are visible because Nick hints about them without providing
further information: “We talked like that for a while, and then abruptly we weren’t talking”
(99). Therefore, the reliability of his narration is questioned.

Throughout *The Great Gatsby*, Nick is trying to appear as a trustworthy narrator
to the reader, as noted in the following quotation: “I am one of the few honest people that I
have ever known” (Fitzgerald 39). This quotation indicates how Nick is trying to persuade the
reader to trust him and also that he is reporting the events of the book accurately because he is
referring to himself as being an honest man. However, in this essay I will argue that Nick
Carraway is an unreliable narrator due to visible textual factors written by Nick. In addition,
this essay further argues that as a consequence of the narrator’s unreliability, some parts of the
story are lost to the reader because Nick is selective in his narrative. Nick’s unreliability will
be studied through the main category that is selectiveness which results in visible gaps in the
book. Four categories are detected through his selectiveness: his deliberate concealment of
information, his censorship, memory and drunkenness. Nick conceals information about
conversations and events, while also trying to censor himself and attempt to only write about
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Gatsby’s life. Moreover, Nick is also selective because of his vague memory that reveals the difficulties Nick has when trying to narrate certain events. Drunkenness category will also be studied for the reason that he is under the influence of alcohol when certain events occur. These categories will not be studied individually because they are associated with and linked to each other. Notably, the concealment is linked to censorship, while drunkenness is also linked to memory.

_The Great Gatsby_ has sparked different interpretations about the narrator’s reliability throughout the years. Many literary critics have analysed the narration and the narrator, Nick Carraway, in order to understand the narrative. A significant number of scholars have also emphasised the fact that Nick is a reliable narrator. One of these scholars is Wayne C. Booth, and it is important to note that he is one of the first to discuss the reliability of a narrator. Booth argues that Nick Carraway is reliable; however, he categorises Nick’s reliability into “younger” and “older” Nick (176). Accordingly, the younger Nick is unreliable and what makes him reliable is his reflection on the past events through his maturity, because of the retrospective telling of the events. Because he had time to process the things that happened and think about the people that he had met. In brief, Booth concludes the following: “[T]he older Nick provides thoroughly reliable guidance” (176). Booth’s argument is one of many arguments that verifies Nick as a reliable narrator. However, numerous studies such as “Nick Carraway as an Unreliable Narrator”, “Nick Carraway and the Imagery of Disorder”, and “Unreliable Narration in The Great Gatsby”, have emerged since _The Rhetoric of Fiction_ that explore the unreliability of Nick through evidence delivered by his own narrative. These studies will be presented and discussed as this essay accounts for the unreliability of Nick.

Other critics have written on the unreliability of Nick as a narrator. One of the most referenced articles on the subject is “Nick Carraway and the Imagery of Disorder” (1967), where Peter Lisca argues that the story is told through Nick’s understanding of the
events woven together with his feelings and reactions. Lisca also writes about a narrator’s objectivity where the reader can acquire a certain type of information that can be categorised by levels of objectivity. For instance, the reader might believe that there exists a house that belonged to Gatsby as the one Nick described. However, it is harder for the reader to accept the authenticity of the conversations that were narrated by Nick because they are influenced by his own opinions. Lisca explains further that the information the reader gains access to is limited because it is written by Nick:

   It must be kept in mind that the novel as we have it is entirely the product of Nick Caraway. Philosophically, of course, it is impossible to distinguish absolutely between things as they are and things as Nick sees them because, as narrator, he is our only source (23).

   He indicates that Nick is the only provider of the story and that the reader cannot gain information from another character; therefore, it is difficult to know the story of The Great Gatsby from another perspective. Another scholar that also argues against Nick’s reliability writes of another aspect. Kent Cartwright argues in his essay, “Nick Carraway as an Unreliable Narrator” (1984), that Nick’s unreliability is the result of not delivering a complete narration of some events that are of importance to the story’s development (218). In his study, Cartwright also argues that Nick, due to the fact that he is a first-person narrator, is limited in his reporting of the events. The result is that Nick is only capable of narrating one side of the story; his perspective and thoughts about the events while also “shift[ing] ground perplexingly, and sometimes even strain[ing] ‘judgments’ out of inconclusive evidence” (Cartwright 219).

   The reason that led to the choice of this specific novel is its popularity and status as one of the most famous classical novels in American Literature, as well as its narrative style. The study will employ the theory of narratology and, specifically, the aspect of the homodiegetic narrator, or, what Phelan and Rabinowitz in their anthology A Companion to Narrative Theory (2005) refer to, as a character narrator that is present with the other
characters (546). This theory will be focused on for the reason that the narrator of *The Great Gatsby* is also a character, and because narratology is the study of structures that are in the narrative (Barry 224). Mieke Bal further explains the structures of narratology in his book *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (2009) and states that narratology “is the ensemble of theories of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artifacts that ‘tell a story.’ Such a theory helps to understand, analyse, and evaluate narratives.” (3). Similarly, this essay divides *The Great Gatsby* into categories that analyse the narrative in the novel. The main category ‘selectiveness’ alongside the four subcategories: concealment, censorship, memory, and drunkenness will be analysed together with specific examples alongside secondary sources to aid the argument and also the theories of narratology and reliability. Furthermore, Wayne C. Booth’s concept ‘unreliable narrator’ will be applied. *The Rhetoric of Fiction* will be used to clarify the term ‘unreliable narrator’ and to study the factors that make a narrator unreliable. In addition, a number of scholarly works, including dissertations, full-length studies on the novel, articles, and literary studies books will be used to examine the previous research in the chosen subject, while also functioning as critical material for the study.
2. Narrative selectiveness

Nick has several roles in his narrative; he functions as one of the main characters in his book, a narrator, but also a “witness” for all the events and the conversations that he writes about. A phrase that is used by Paul M. Levitt in his article “Point of View, Telephones, Doubling, and Vicarious Learning in The Great Gatsby” (2012) as he states that the witness’ point of view needs to work efficiently; therefore, a narrator needs to handle and control the information that he or she conveys. The information needs to be “natural”, “reasonable”, and “inevitable” (Levitt 301). However, if “the narrator’s sources of information invite the reader’s disbelief, this particular point of view fails” (301). Given these points, the narrator becomes unreliable due to providing suspicious information to the reader. In addition, comparing this to Nick’s narrative, an assumption can be made that Nick is selective and provides incomplete information that creates suspicions for the reader to assume that Nick is not truthful.

This chapter focuses on Nick’s selectiveness that elucidates the visible gaps in the book that he is writing. The selectiveness, in its turn, is divided into four categories that will account for Nick’s unreliability: concealment of information, censorship, memory, and drunkenness. These categories will be accounted for together in order to examine Nick’s narration in which has left gaps. The narrative gaps represent the gaps in his memory either because he deliberately chose not to tell about the events, or because it is the consequence of not remembering those events. Nick’s selectiveness makes him an unreliable narrator because he is selective with regard to the information that he includes in his account of the events.
2.1 Concealment and censorship

The first two categories that will be viewed in this chapter are concealment and censorship in Nick’s narrative. Nick decided to be cryptic in certain events in his book where he, every so often, only hints to the reader about certain conversations that occurred with other people while concealing further information about what was said and conveyed. For instance, Nick’s telephone conversation with his girlfriend Jordan that lead to their breakup, where he only hints about the conversation instead of giving the reader a clear description (99).

As previously mentioned, Phelan established in his book the three roles of a narrator: “reporting, interpreting, and evaluating” (50) and the reporting role in Phelan’s study can be linked to the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*. Certain gaps or ellipses in the timeline are visible, as Nick fails to report or chooses not to report, as can be noted from the previous example about the telephone conversation. What makes the concealed conversations visible to the reader is the fact that they occurred with important characters and not with secondary characters that do not affect the plot of Nick’s book. Nick conceals conversations that occurred with his cousin Daisy, with Gatsby, and with Jordan, and these conversations will be further discussed and contextualised. The concealed conversations can be believed to be of importance because they occurred in the summer that Nick is basing his book on and with people that are of great influence for the story. An example of such concealed conversations is his first conversation with Gatsby (31) and also his telephone conversation with Jordan (99).

Matthew J. Bolton discusses the gaps in the book as important to the story because in this case, the narrator is selecting certain events to narrate while concealing others, and the concealed information will be studied in the upcoming parts of the essay. In Bolton’s study “A Fragment of Lost words: Narrative Ellipses in *The Great Gatsby*” (2010), the importance of ellipses is emphasised (he employs the term ellipses and also the term gaps), where studying Nick’s “elisions, omissions, and silence” (190) is as essential as interpreting his
words. An example of Nick’s silence is the example of his conversation with his cousin Daisy and her husband Tom that is discussed in the next paragraph. I believe Nick is silent for a reason, and that the reason is worth searching for and studying in order to understand why he chose to conceal some of the events and the conversations that he is still choosing to hint at and write about. Thus, this chapter focuses on the concealed conversations and information that, as previously mentioned, are visible to the reader because Nick hints about them but does not provide clear description.

To begin with, Nick made a number of gaps visible by telling about events while covering further information. An evident example is in the first chapter when Nick meets his cousin Daisy and her husband Tom, after a long time of not having seen each other. Daisy asks Nick about his previous engagement that she heard rumours about and Nick contradicts Daisy’s claim by saying that “[i]t’s a libel. I’m too poor” (15). However, Nick tells the reader that he knew what Daisy meant but he wished not to discuss it, and all he told about the subject is how the rumours made him flee to the East. As he writes: “Of course I knew what they were referring to, but I wasn’t even vaguely engaged. The fact that gossip had published the banns was one of the reasons I had come East” (15). It is clear that Nick was dishonest with Daisy and Tom, an observation that is crucial for the study given the fact that he refers to himself as “one of the few honest people that [he has] ever known” (39).

It is important to note that Nick selected the information that he wanted to reveal in his book, information that regarded his life, such as his account for his early life in chapter one, his upbringing, and his decision of moving to the east. However, once the narrative plot turns to his own biography, he tries to conceal such information from the reader. This is visible in the first chapter when he tries to conceal information about his engagement and his past in the West, as mentioned earlier. This is a narration technique that Bolton categorises into “narrative selectiveness” (193), where he notices that Nick selects the conversations and
events that he wants to narrate and is mysterious and chooses to leave gaps when the “topic turns to his own biography” (193). Therefore, the reader does not find further information about Nick’s previous life, his past relationships, his service during the war or his time in New York, before moving to Long Island. Instead, he chooses to tell his own version of Jay Gatsby’s story.

Another gap is visible at the end of the book during Nick’s telephone conversation with Jordan Baker, Daisy’s friend with whom Nick had a relationship. Nick and Jordan were arguing about the events of the previous evening, as Nick writes that both Jordan and Nick were troubled by each other’s actions the night of the accident as he writes: “her next remark made me rigid” (98) when Jordan says that Nick “weren’t so nice to [her] last night” and he responds with: “[h]ow could it have mattered then?” (99). In expressing his disappointment with Jordan and the conversation, Nick chooses to not write further about the conversation in which they were trying to make plans to see each other and instead cuts the conversation midsentence: “It’s impossible this afternoon. Various –” (99). By doing this, he denies the reader further access to the conversation that lead to one of them hanging up on the other and ending the relationship. The only information the reader obtains access to, with regard to how the relationship ends, is a short passage in which Nick summarises their conversation in a quick reflection: “We talked like that for a while, and then abruptly we weren’t talking any longer. I don’t know which of us hung up with a sharp click, but I know I didn’t care” (99). It is important to establish the fact that Nick has the power over the information that the reader receives, and by choosing to be cryptic when the narrative turns to his own biography indicates that a part of the main story is not revealed. To emphasise this statement, Thomas A. Hanzo writes in his article “The Theme and The Narrator of ‘The Great Gatsby’” (1957) about the fundamental task of the narrator: “The narrator’s part complicates the action. We are expected to realize that what we are told comes to us through his peculiar
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agency, and therefore […] our knowledge of the narrator will establish the limits of our knowledge of the whole action” (185-186). Hence, Nick’s own story is important for the narrative of his book.

The reason why this makes an odd account as written by Nick is the fact that he is known for his attention to details; the indication that serves as an example for this is his thorough report of the guests that attended Gatsby’s parties in chapter four. From “Clarence Endive [who] came only once, in white knickerbockers, and had a fight with a bum named Etty in the garden” to “Henry L. Palmetto, who killed himself by jumping in front of a subway train in Times Square” (40). Nick writes three pages of names that attended the parties, details that almost seemed impossible to remember. Nonetheless, what is brought to attention is the fact that he could not give an equally detailed record of what was discussed in the conversation that occurred between him and Jordan that lead to them breaking up. Nick’s way of omitting conversations is also visible in another chapter of the book where Nick relates how he met Gatsby for the first time. Nick gives a summary of their conversation instead of providing the same thorough description as he did with the guest list. When the two men, Gatsby and Nick, first meet each other, Gatsby starts a conversation with Nick and tells him that he looks familiar. Gatsby also asks Nick if he was “in the Third Division during the war” (31). At this point it is clear that the two men were in World War I and they start chatting about the infantries that they served in. However, the conversation gets cut by Nick’s narrative as he summarises his conversation with Gatsby and writes: “We talked for a moment about some wet, grey little villages in France” (31). The word ‘some’ can be seen as a poor word choice to describe the first conversation he had with the person that is the focus of Nick’s book. To clarify, Nick chose to write about Gatsby’s story, but it is odd that he only summarised his first conversation with Gatsby, instead of giving the reader an account of the conversation. In addition, it also makes Nick’s choice of narrative odd because in the next
chapter he gives a complete report of the guests that attended Gatsby’s parties, but did not provide an equally detailed report of his first conversation with Gatsby. And once again, this choice of narrative technique is contradicting his attention to detail and his detailed description of the people that attended the Gatsby’s parties. Bolton sheds light on this scene and argues that when teaching about writing, writers in fiction writing workshops are often encouraged not to “tell” the story but to “show” (195) what they want the reader to perceive. He argues further that Nick’s narrative technique is not an ideal example for how to “tell” the story. However, Bolton points out that Nick needs to “show” the discussion that happened between him and Gatsby. By doing that, Nick censors himself once more when the plot turns to explain his past while also “[deflating] this opening conversation with Gatsby (Bolton 195).

One can also observe that Nick still chooses to write or hint at the information that he does not wish to explain further, instead of eliminating and not writing about the events that contained such information. Yet, Nick still feels compelled to deliver and report the conversations and the events that are of importance to his account. In other words, Nick might have realised that he needs to include the first time he met Gatsby in his book, but he does not want to fully report further information that was shared between them when talking about the war, because it also includes writing about his own past. What he does instead is summarise the conversation and then shift the attention back to Gatsby. As Bolton further writes, Nick’s narratives selectiveness makes the reader question Nick’s reliability, when he chooses to conceal information about himself. Bolton states the following: “Having seen this process at work twice, the reader ought to begin wondering what else Nick has chosen to omit from his narrative, what else might come to light if only someone were to ask him about it” (195). As this could be detected in the text and it is also important to point out that the reader would not have known about Nick’s relationship in New York, if Daisy had not mentioned it. Therefore, one can speculate what further information is hidden. The book Nick is writing,
therefore, cannot be seen as the story of Jay Gatsby’s life and death because Nick is only writing from his own perspective, from the rumours and what other people told him about Gatsby. To emphasize this fact, Nancy. G. Marie Antoinette argues in her dissertation *Narrative Fission and Fusion: The Author – Reader Dyad in Select Fiction* (2015) that Nick is unreliable due to his collecting Gatsby’s story from different people and “since his account of the Gatsby story is itself a collage of different people’s accounts” and therefore his position as a narrator “breaks his role as a reliable narrator” (105). Therefore, Nick cannot be trusted as a narrator because he writes, what he believes, is the truth about Gatsby’s life while the information he provides is altered, omitted and selected by him and collected from other people that hardly knew Gatsby. And Marie Antoinette concludes that there are visible examples in Nick’s writing where he concealed and skipped details about himself; therefore, one is suspicions about to what degree he might have “omitted/manipulated” information regarding other people and the events that he is narrating (105).

Going back to James Phelan’s study, narrators serve three functions, “reporting, interpreting, and evaluating” (50) and this suggests that Nick failed to report events that he either concealed or because he wanted to censor himself out of the story while still feeling obligated to write about Gatsby’s story. By doing this, he left gaps in the story that only he could gain access to. Events, such as, what was discussed between Nick and Jordan on the telephone that lead to their breakup, further information on his first conversation with Gatsby, or what happened between him and the girl that he had a relationship with back home remain untold because only Nick is capable of delivering the complete information and he chose to conceal some of it.
2.2 Memory and drunkenness

Nick left visible gaps in his writing when he tried to select the events and the conversations that he wanted to include in his narrative. These gaps mean either not wanting to write about his past or his trying to conceal information from the reader. However, there is also another factor that affects his perception and memory resulting in his textual selectiveness and narrative gaps in the text that is his drunkenness. Nick’s memory and drunkenness will, therefore, be discussed in this chapter. Although his concealment and censorship have already been discussed in the previous chapter, they will also be mentioned in this chapter. For the reason that all the four categories go hand in hand under the category of selectiveness.

Nick’s narrative reliability is brought to the stand when he chooses to write about the evening that he spends at Tom’s apartment in New York, although admitting to being drunk. By establishing in the opening of that scene the fact that he has been drunk “so everything has a dim, hazy cast over it […]” (20) Nick makes it justifiable not to provide a full account of the events of that evening and leave gaps in the timeline. Nick vaguely narrates that afternoon, unlike his detailed description of events and people, that is illustrated in chapter four. He blames his vague narration on his drinking, and this results in an unclear and unstructured narration where he loses track of time quite a few times. According to Nick, it was nine o’clock but “almost immediately afterwards I looked at my watch and found it was ten” (25). This results in a one-hour loss without his being aware of it. In addition, he writes that people came and went that day, and he indicates his unawareness of what happened and who came to the apartment: “People disappeared, reappeared, made plans to go somewhere, and then lost each other, searched for each other a few feet away” (25).

During the same evening, Nick starts, not only losing track of time, but also being confused about his whereabouts. He writes about following Mr. McKee into the elevator. And, followed by ellipses, he finds himself “standing beside [Mr. McKee’s] bed …
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sitting up between the sheets, clad in his underwear, with a great portfolio in his hands” (25-26). In this part of the evening, Nick does not tell the time of this passage, but he suddenly leaps in his narration from the elevator to the bedroom. It is unclear for the reader what happened between the party and Mr. McKee’s bedroom as Nick does not write about it nor mentions it in another chapter. For this reason, the question this ending of a chapter awakens is why did Nick chose not to write about what happened? Nick confesses that he was drunk that evening, and this could have led to losing his memory of certain events, which might be the reason as to why the gaps are visible. Bolton, on the other hand, questions Nick’s silence as to whether Nick is trying to conceal his sexuality by not giving information about himself and Mr. McKee or whether his narration of that event is an imitation of his drunken memory and behaviour? (197). Nonetheless, if Nick did, indeed, try to conceal his sexuality then he would not have written about the scene in the room with Mr. McKee; he would, instead, have concealed it altogether and not revealed it to the reader. Instead, a better explanation of his choice of narration is the fact that he wanted to mimic his drunken memories and write about them in the way he remembers them, by leaving gaps in the chapter in places in which there were gaps in his own stream of consciousness. This type of narrative can also be referred to as stream of consciousness as Nick attempts to include his whole consciousness, instead of only focusing on delivering his thoughts of the events. Stream of consciousness is a “narrative technique in nondramatic fiction intended to render the flow [sic] myriad impressions – visual, auditory, physical, associative, and subliminal – that impinge on the consciousness of an individual and form part of his awareness along with the trend of his rational thoughts” (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica). In this case, Nick provides a full account of his consciousness as he is intoxicated by alcohol and narrates the events in the way that he remembers.
At the end of chapter two is yet another gap where Nick moves from Mr. McKee’s room to “lying half-asleep in the cold lower level of the Pennsylvania Station” (26). This gap in the story indicates an absence of information that either the narrator did not feel the need to tell the reader about or his narration of that evening resembles the way he remembers it. This also brings the reader’s attention to Nick’s narrative selectiveness as he is selecting parts that he wants to include which sometimes results in the events that are written as incomplete and lacking information in order for the reader to understand the story. Also, as previously argued, such parts could easily be unwritten as Nick could not narrate them entirely. For instance, Nick could have ended his account of the evening after he entered the elevator with Mr. McKee, and they started making plans of meeting as Mr. McKee said: “Come to lunch someday” and Nick answered with: “All right … I’ll be glad to” (25). This is where Nick could have stopped narrating the events and the reader would not have questioned Nick’s choice of ending the chapter. Instead, Nick chose to continue writing about the evening in a very distorted and disordered manner, resulting in a complex chapter ending that puzzles the reader. By narrating partially events and conversations, the reader is left with unanswered questions as to why Nick chooses to include incomplete parts in his book. Bolton, on the other hand, examines the ellipses in chapter two and argues that the gap between the apartment and the train station is not Nick’s secretiveness, because he would not have written about them at all. Instead, it is, as Bolton argues, “the hampered perceptions and disjointed memories that drunkenness can produce” (198). If Nick is fully aware of the fact that he is drunk that evening, then why does he write about that evening? How can the reader believe in the events of a chapter when the narrator begins by stating that he was drunk? Bolton states that the gaps in the text signify Nick “losing control of [his narrative]” (198). In other words, Nick might think that he is in control over his own narrative because he can select what to
include and what to conceal; however, for the reader, it is a sign of losing control and becoming an unreliable narrator.

Nick’s narrative selectiveness can also be viewed as dishonesty for the reason that Nick is not truthful in his narration, as he is hiding information from the reader. He keeps referring to himself as an honest man from a well-known wealthy family. However, Nick keeps contradicting himself throughout the book, because, although he claims that he is “inclined to reserve all judgments” (3), he reveals at the end that he has been judging Gatsby and has “disapproved of him from the very beginning to the end” (98). Nick did after all, reveal that he admired Gatsby and that he thought of him differently:

When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention for ever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart. Only Gatsby […] was exempt from my reaction – Gatsby, who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn […] there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life […] an extraordinary gift of hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again. No – Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed in 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 (3-4).

The reader could question how a narrator could have different opinions in different passages of his book, a matter that Booth addressed in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Booth discusses Nick’s narrative technique, in which he deliberately introduces in advance, information that he learns later on and it is what makes Nick reliable (176). In other words, the fact that Nick knows in advance what is going to happen and the way he conveys his knowledge of certain events while he is telling the story is the reason for Booth’s opinion of Nick as a reliable narrator. Because the “older” Nick is providing “reliable guidance” for the unreliable witness that is the “younger” Nick (176). That is to say, Booth believes that the “younger” Nick is unreliable because he has still not processed the events and does not know what is going to happen. However, the “older” Nick has the advantage of time that gives him
the opportunity to process the events of what happened to Gatsby, and know in advance what incidents will occur.

Nonetheless, Nick keeps contradicting himself throughout his book, as he believes to be “one of the few honest people” (39). Still, his actions again prove otherwise when he does not tell his cousin Daisy about the affair that her husband was having, although writing that he disapproves of it. As Thomas E. Boyle wrote in his article “Unreliable Narration in The Great Gatsby” (1969): “The instance is but one of many in which Nick himself displays the very qualities he finds reprehensible in others” (22). To emphasize, Nick is dishonest on several occasions as he does not reveal to Mr. Wilson the fact that Tom is lying to him when Tom declares that the yellow car that hit Mrs. Wilson is not his and that he “[hasn’t] seen it all afternoon” (90). Nick knows that Tom lies in this instance and that he had seen the car and knew who was driving, but he does not reveal it to Mr. Wilson nor the police officer that is nearby. He remains silent and does not tell the truth, thus resulting in Gatsby’s death on the same night.

All the previous examples verify Nick’s dishonesty towards the people that he associated with and this also represents Nick’s dishonesty as a narrator too. Dennis and Trotman argue more regarding the issue of Nick’s narrative and describe in their article “Deconstruction Literary Theory and A Creative Reading of The Great Gatsby” (1991) that Nick is more than an unreliable narrator. They state that he is very “dishonest”, “hypocritical” and an “amoral relativist,” as he selects the information that suits his position of being a narrator and at the same time expects the reader to “believe” and “sympathise” with him (6). Nick does that by establishing his background from the very beginning as he writes that he comes from a well-known family and good upbringing and, at the same time, keeps reminding the reader throughout the book that he is honest and non-judgemental.
Given these points, his reliability becomes an issue because if he could lie to other people that were in his surroundings and, further, about his qualities and, suppress his past, then he could easily lie to the reader about the events that occurred in the book. An issue that Collin S. Cass also raises in his article “Pandered in Whispers: Narrative Reliability in *The Great Gatsby*” (1980) as he states that “[i]f a sound case can be made for Nick as hypocrite, then his narrative becomes unreliable” (114). In this case, Nick’s multiple contradictions in his writing serve as evidence of his unreliability.

Having established Nick’s dishonesty, a further argument can be made regarding the drunkenness category. Nick admits that he has been drunk twice in his life, and the second time is at Tom’s apartment in New York. Yet, there is another evident example where his perception is once again affected by alcohol. The first time he attends Gatsby’s party Nick admits to drinking and that “[he] was on [his] way to get roaring drunk from sheer embarrassment” (28) because he was alone at a party. However, his plan is interrupted by the arrival of Jordan Baker. At this point, the reader could conclude that Nick did not become intoxicated and that he might have been merely dazed from consuming a little alcohol. Then again, this conclusion can be questioned in light of other passages written by Nick later at that party. First, Nick continues drinking at Gatsby’s “I was enjoying myself now. I had taken two finger-bowls of champagne, and the scene had changed before my eyes into something significant, elemental and profound.” (31). Nick admits that his perception is altered due to his drinking champagne, and one can suspect that the glasses of champagne altered his awareness of the events at that party, which, in its turn, could have affected his narration.

Another questioned statement that is written by Nick are the words: “Almost the last thing I remember” (68) where he is at yet another party hosted by Gatsby. The presence of alcohol is clearly established by Nick when he writes that he is at “a particularly tipsy table” (68). Now given the fact that Nick is not completely straightforward and that there are several examples
of his being dishonest, as was discussed previously in this essay, one could establish the fact that Nick is not honest in this chapter either. He mentions in chapter two that he has been drunk only twice in his life and the second time is at the party that he is writing about in chapter two. However, he contradicts his claim by writing a few chapters later that he nearly became intoxicated again at Gatsby’s party. One could argue that the fact that “on my way to get drunk” (28) does not conclude the fact that he did get drunk. Still, Nick continues drinking champagne and most likely becomes intoxicated at that party.

Additionally, in the book’s last chapter, a certain part of the story is lost because Nick only provides information about Mr. Wilson’s movement and the way he kills Gatsby, through his reading in the newspaper. Nick writes the following about the articles: “Most of those reports were a nightmare – grotesque, circumstantial, eager and untrue” (104). In other words, Nick is not able to narrate the events in which Mr. Wilson finds out it was Gatsby’s car that hit his wife and he seeks revenge by killing Gatsby. Nick is only capable of narrating what he finds out from his surroundings. In other words, Nick is limited in his narration due to being a character and a witness, making him report only what he could see and experience in person, as well as what he could read in the newspapers and hear from other people. For instance, Nick could not be having his telephone conversation with Jordan and at the same time, track Mr. Wilson’s steps and be present in the incident where Gatsby was murdered.

Additionally, William F. Riggan discusses narrative reliability and states that all first-person narrators are unreliable because they are limited to information. And the information that they gain access to, is altered by their memory, perception, and assessment. In this case, narrators may fail to recall a certain event or miss it (qtd in Murphy 2012, 70). As Riggan suggests, a narrator that is telling his own story is not the only one that is unreliable, but even the narrator that observes and tells the story of other characters in the story, since:

[s]uch a narrator can only report to the best of his ability and recollection the overt words and actions of his protagonist’s life and draw from these his inferences and interpretations.
concerning the inner nature of that protagonist. He is incapable of penetrating directly into the psyche of the protagonist or of any other character within the chronicle (qtd in Murphy 70).

This is visible in Nick’s narration because the story is affected by what he can and cannot remember and by the fact that he provides a detailed description of the events that he observes with a clear head and the plot that suits his narration. However, his narration is vague in events where he wants to conceal himself or where he mimics the gaps in his memory. Although having a detailed narration of certain chapters, Nick still does not provide a complete narration in certain events, which remain untold for the reader. This indicates that he is not as accurate as a reader needs the narrator to be when he is telling a story.

Nick contradicts his claims more than a few times, by either claiming that he is being honest, not a judgemental person, or that he has only been intoxicated twice in his life. He conceals information and censors himself, although being a narrator. It is important to realize that a narrator such as Nick is our only key to understanding the narrative and, having a misleading and intoxicated narrator, makes the reader suspicious of the plot that the narrator is conveying, thus making him unreliable. As O'Rourke states in his article “Nick Carraway as Narrator in The Great Gatsby” (1982) “I would be naive to expect a slow-thinking, sentimental, and occasionally dishonest narrator to be totally reliable. When an element of distortion is added, the challenge of perception becomes prodigious” (58). His unreliability causes the reader to question his objectivity in the story or the fact that he might not have reported the full events of that summer to the reader.
3. Conclusion

This study has focused on the narrative reliability in *The Great Gatsby*, where Nick’s unreliable narration was studied through the main category of selectiveness. The main focus of the study was to provide evidence of Nick’s unreliability due to selecting the events and the conversations while trying to conceal others by leaving gaps and censoring his own past. Nick also failed to narrate certain events because his memory failed him while also being vague in his narration in certain scenes due to being intoxicated. These elements resulted in parts of the story being lost to the reader due to Nick not delivering a complete narration of the events.

Nick selects information such as events and conversations that concern Gatsby’s life and death and his selectiveness becomes visible as he tries to include such information while concealing other from the reader and censoring himself out of his own writing. It is visible that Nick selects information to write about instead of providing a thorough narrative, hence causing confusion. To put it differently, Nick was present throughout the story in the events which affected Gatsby’s story, and by concealing information about his own story or not managing to deliver a complete account of the events, he conceals information from the main plot.

Another point which causes Nick to be unreliable is his contradicting himself, by believing that he is an honest man but at the same time lying to other characters, and by being judgemental despite the fact that he was raised to not judge people. Nick also had his perception altered by consuming alcohol while, at the same time, still choosing to include the events in which he was drunk. By doing so, he delivers unreliable narration, leaving gaps in his narrative and losing his memory. His unreliability raises the questions as to who the real Nick Carraway is, why he became involved and interested in Gatsby’s life, why he censors himself out of his own book, and most importantly, whether there may be an alternate truth to the one Nick is conveying.
Works Cited


