

Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*: between *My Ántonia* and *A Lost Lady*

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I Introduction

Since Maxwell Geismar, in his *The Last of the Provincials*, commented on “similarity of theme and tone between the closing sections of *My Ántonia* and *The Great Gatsby*,”¹ there have been some critical analyses on the so-called Cather’s “influence” on Fitzgerald. One of the close analyses, in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: His Art and His Technique*, James E. Miller, Jr. says that Fitzgerald learned a great deal from Cather about “the manipulation of point of view and about form and unity.”²

On the other hand, Tom Quirk argues that “Cather’s influence was not restricted to matters of technique alone,”³ and comments on the importance of Fitzgerald’s “affinity with her.” In any way, at least, it seems that Fitzgerald learned something from Cather, as Linda Wagner-Martin also says in *The Modern American Novel 1914-1945: A Critical History*: “F. Scott Fitzgerald learned a great deal from *My Ántonia*—and from Cather’s *A Lost Lady*, in which the story is again told through the eyes of a male character rather than from the perspective of the woman protagonist—when he created Nick Carraway to narrate *The Great Gatsby*.”⁴

In this paper, a logical analysis of the narrations in *My Ántonia*, *A Lost Lady* and *The Great Gatsby* will be treated, so that what Fitzgerald may have learned from Cather might be more fully understood from the viewpoint of technique, which Miller did not treat in detail in his book.

II *My Ántonia*

The narrative way of *My Ántonia* seems logical and there seems no logical irrelevance of the narration in *My Ántonia*. That is to say, the narrator, Jim Burden, narrates in general what he sees, or what he knows about Ántonia. For instance, in Book V, after the reunion with Ántonia, he says: “Before I could sit down in the chair she offered me, the miracle happened; one of those quiet moments that clutch the heart, and take more courage than the noisy, excited passages in life. Ántonia came in and stood before me; a stalwart, brown woman, flat-chested, her curly brown hair a little grizzled. It was a shock, of course.”⁵ Here the

1. Maxwell Geismar, *The Last of the Provincials: The American Novel, 1915-1925* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1943), p. 166.

2. James E. Miller Jr., *F. Scott Fitzgerald: His Art and His Technique* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), p. 92.

3. Tom Quirk, “Fitzgerald and Cather: *The Great Gatsby*,” in *American Literature*, Volume 54, Number 4, December 1982.

4. Linda Wagner-Martin, in *Ántonia*, edited by Harold Bloom (New York and Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers: 1991), p. 62.

5. *My Ántonia*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1918), p. 331. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

narrator writes just what he experienced before him directly.

On the other hand, what he cannot know about *Ántonia*, for instance, he introduces in the story via the third person. So, from a logical point of view, in the narrative way of *My Ántonia*, Cather seems to treat the narrator as strictly and logically as possible, because she differentiates what he can not know about from what he can know about. She never lets the narrator tell what he cannot possibly know about. This may be shown best in the following scene in Book IV, “The Pioneer Woman’s Story”: “Poor *Ántonia*! Everyone would be saying that now, I thought bitterly. I replied that grandmother had written me how *Ántonia* went away to marry Larry Donovan at some place where he was working; that he had deserted her, and that there was now a baby. This was all I knew” (297-98). When Jim Burden, the narrator, says “This was all I knew,” it is explicit that Cather tries to let the narrator tell only what he can know about *Ántonia* directly.

But it is important here to note that Jim sometimes narrates what is impossible for him to know about, which is, strictly speaking, an example of an illogical narration. One of the best examples can be shown in the following episode of the pianist, called Blind d’Alnault in Book II, “Hired Girls.” Here Jim, as the narrator, goes to see with *Ántonia* the piano performance by the pianist: “The door from the office opened, and Johnnie Gardener came in, directing Blind d’Alnault—he would never consent to be led” (183). So far, Jim narrates what he directly experienced about the pianist. But when Jim goes on writing about the life of the blind pianist, he seems to narrate what he could not experience: “He was born in the Far South, on the d’Arnault plantation, where the spirit if not the fact of slavery persisted. When he was three weeks old, he had an illness which left him totally blind. As soon as he was old enough to sit up alone and toddle about, another affliction, the nervous motion of his body, became apparent” (185). This is the information that Jim could not possibly know directly. At the same time, he never informs the reader that it is a story which was told to him by someone else, but he narrates it just as if he knew the pianist for himself. Thus, although in general Jim narrates just what he saw for himself, the reader will easily see that he goes too far when he narrates about the pianist, causing a digression in this novel.

It is well known that this apparently “illogical” narration sometimes causes a digression in *My Ántonia*, which can be considered as a technical failure of this novel. For instance, Miller comments as follows: ‘In this fashion, the way is prepared for much of the narrative not strictly the story of *Ántonia*, for example, the accounts of Lena Lingard and Tiny Soderball. Whether such material, only indirectly relevant to the central story, is justified or not, the lack of form in the novel constitutes a real defect, and it is not probable that Fitzgerald developed his concern for form (“My third novel ... is an attempt at form”) from his reading of *My Ántonia*’ (89-90).

About these technical failures, for instance, E. K. Brown also writes: “A comment on *My Ántonia* that Willa Cather made in an interview she gave in Lincoln a few years after the book came out shows that in her use of Jim Burden as narrator she had been trying to achieve two effects that were really compatible: “Jim was to be fascinated by *Ántonia* as only a man could be, and he was to remain a detached observer,

appreciative but inactive, rather than take a part in life”⁶ (202). By remaining ‘a detached observer,’ the narrator can and may tell the reader only what he directly experiences. But on the other hand, it seems doubtful that the detachedness of the narrator, in spite of the generally logical approach of the narration, achieved a successful effect in *My Ántonia*. At any rate, it is important to see that one of the characteristics of the narrator in *My Ántonia* is the detachedness, which sometimes results in a digression.

III *A Lost Lady*

When we think of one of the characteristics of the narrator in *My Ántonia* as his detached but logical approach to the heroine, what about *A Lost Lady*? In this story, Cather seems to try to experiment with Niel Herbert in the same logical approach as in *My Ántonia*, but this time Niel is not a detached observer. He is always close to the heroine, Marian Forrester, to tell the reader what he observed about her. So it seems hardly possible for Cather to write what he did not observe about her, to keep its logical consistency very strictly.

Niel had to face and observe even the love affair, for instance, between Mrs. Forrester and Frank Ellinger in Chapter VII, Part I: “After tying his flowers with a twist of meadow grass, he went up the hill through the grove and softly round the still house to the north side of Mrs. Forrester’s own room, where door-like green shutters were closed. As he bent to place the flowers on the sill, he heard from within a woman’s soft laughter; impatient, indulgent teasing, eager. Then another laugh, very different, a man’s. And it was fat and lazy,—ended in something like a yawn.”⁷ Here, Niel is not a detached observer, but a device of Cather’s narration, without his seeing the love affair, the story would not be going on.

Once again, as the final disillusionment toward Mrs. Forrester, Niel had to face and observe the relationship between Mrs. Forrester and Ivy Peters in Chapter IX, Part II: “Going over to see her one summer evening, he stopped a moment by the dining-room window to look at the honeysuckle. The dining-room door was open into the kitchen, and there Mrs. Forrester stood at a table, making pastry. Ivy Peters came in at the kitchen door, walked up behind her, and unconcernedly put both arms around her, his hands meeting over her breast. She did not move, did not look up, but went on rolling out pastry.” (169-70). Here again, Niel, being not a detached observer, but an active observer tells the reader just what he observed about her.

How did Cather treat what Niel could not directly experience with Mrs. Forrester? She seems to keep its logical consistency even here like in *My Ántonia*. He seemed never to tell the reader what is logically impossible for him to know about. For instance, he never knows about the “afterlife” of Mrs. Forrester. But

6. Edward Killoran Brown, *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography*, (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), reprint, pp.89-90. Originally published: (New York: Knopf, 1953)

7. *A Lost Lady*, Vintage Books Edition, (New York: Random House, Inc., 1972), p. 86. Originally published: (New York: Knopf, 1923). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

Cather here, instead of making him tell the story of Mrs. Forrester, makes him see a man who knows about Mrs. Forrester, keeping its logical consistency: “I’m Ed Elliot, and I thought it must be you. Could we take a table together? I promised an old friend of yours to give you a message, if I ever ran across you. You remember Mrs. Forrester? Well, I saw her again, twelve years after she left Sweet Water,—down in Buenos Ayres” (172). As a device of telling the story, he seems never to go out of the logical narration.

Although its narration is logically consistent, unlike the detached observer, Jim Burden, Niel Herbert, as a consistent observer, seems to have its limitation as the observer, because of his consistency. So Cather created two strictly logical observers: Jim Burden and Niel Herbert. The former is detached, while the latter is “attached,” experimenting two polarities of the narrations. And it seems from the two experiments of the narrations by Cather, that F. S. Fitzgerald learned a great deal from her style.

IV *The Great Gatsby*

The narrator of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway, appears to go midway between the two polarities: Jim Burden and Niel Herbert. That is to say, unlike the two observers, Nick is not always a detached observer, at the same time, he is not always an “attached” observer. Moreover, unlike the two logically consistent observers by Cather, Nick sometimes tells the reader what is logically impossible for him to know about.

First of all, let us examine how he observes in *The Great Gatsby*. It may be almost useless to say that Nick comes to know and observes Gatsby gradually. For instance, This is the scene where Nick sees Gatsby for the first time, in the end of Chapter I: “When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness”⁸ (22). It is very natural that Nick, as the “attached” narrator, tells the reader what he observes in an “attached” way like Niel Herbert.

On the other hand, Nick sometimes shows his side as a “detached” observer. For instance, it is impossible for him what will happen between Gatsby and Daisy after his reunion with her, when Nick leaves them in Chapter V: “They had forgotten me, but Daisy glanced up and held out her hand; Gatsby didn’t know me now at all. I looked once more at them and they looked back at me, remotely, possessed by intense life. Then I went out of the room and down the marble steps into the rain leaving them there together” (97). Here, Nick is as objective and detached as Jim Burden.

Then, how did Fitzgerald treat what was impossible for the narrator to know about Gatsby? Just like the two logical observers by Cather, Nick sometimes gets information about Gatsby from the third person, for example, from Jordan Baker. The following is the story told to Nick by Jordan about Daisy and Gatsby in Chapter IV: ‘Well, about six weeks ago, she heard the name Gatsby for the first time in years. It was when I asked you—do you remember?—if you knew Gatsby in West Egg. After you had gone home she came into my room and woke me up, and said: “What Gatsby?” and when I described him—I was half asleep—she said

8. *The Great Gatsby*, (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1925), p. 22. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

in the strangest voice that it must be the man she used to know' (79). Here Fitzgerald keeps the logical consistency of the narration, because Nick never tells about what is impossible for him to know or experience. So in this respect, Nick's approach to *Gatsby* is as logically consistent as Jim's or Niel's.

Again, it is important to note here that Nick goes midway between the two polarities: Jim, the detached, and Niel, the attached. Nick is at the same time the detached and the attached, which will be shown best in the following: "I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life" (36). These two words, 'within' and 'without' illustrate the characteristic of the narration in *The Great Gatsby*.

However, in spite of the overall seeming logical consistency of the narration, there are some logical "inconsistencies" in *The Great Gatsby*. That is to say, unlike Jim Burden and Niel Herbert, Nick tells the reader what is impossible for him to know about, which can be overlooked easily by the reader because of the technique of Fitzgerald. For instance, strictly speaking, it sounds strange when Nick narrates at the scene of the murder in Chapter VIII as follows: "At two o'clock Gatsby put on his bathing-suit and left word with the butler that if any one phoned word was to be brought to him at the pool. He stopped at the garage for a pneumatic mattress that had amused his guests during the summer, and the chauffeur helped him pump it up" (161). It is impossible here for the narrator to witness Gatsby stopping at the garage. But Nick narrates as if he were there to witness Gatsby.

Then, soon after that, Nick continues narrating as follows: "Gatsby shouldered the mattress and started for the pool. Once he stopped and shifted it a little, and the chauffeur asked him if he needed help, but he shook his head and in a moment disappeared among the yellowing trees" (161-62). Here again, Nick narrates what he cannot witness, as if he were there to witness.

Interestingly enough, in the paragraph soon after this quotation, Nick shifts again to his own viewpoint, which is easily recognized by the reader: "No telephone message arrived, but the butler went without his sleep and waited for it until four o'clock—until long after there was any one to give it to if it came. I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn't believe it would come, and perhaps he no longer cared" (162). When Nick here says that he has an idea about Gatsby, it is without doubt that he just says that from his own point of view. But in the first part of the paragraph, saying about the telephone message, it is clear that he narrates what he cannot witness, as if he were there to witness Gatsby.

As the last instance, in Chapter VII, from the view point of the young Greek, Michaelis, Fitzgerald tries to describe the details of Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, which are impossible for Nick to know, but he narrates as follows: "The young Greek, Michaelis, who ran the coffee joint beside the ashheaps was the principal witness at the inquest. He had slept through the heat until after five, when he strolled over to the garage, and found George Wilson sick in his office—really sick, pale as his own pale hair and shaking all over. Michaelis advised him to go to bed, but Wilson refused, saying that he'd miss a lot of business if he did. While his neighbor was trying to persuade him a violent racket broke out overhead" (137). Here, the narrator tells the reader what is impossible for him to see, as if he were there in the Wilson's garage. At the same time, the narrator never

introduces the story as was told to him by someone else, while he introduces the story of Daisy and Gatsby told by Jordan, for instance, as a story which he never knows.

Only in a few cases, after all, strictly speaking, Nick seems to narrate in a illogical way, but because of Fitzgerald's technique, it is probable that most of the reader would not see the illogical approach in this novel.

V Conclusion

From the viewpoint of the logical analysis of the narrations in *My Ántonia*, *A Lost Lady* through *The Great Gatsby*, both Cather and Fitzgerald experimented with a variety of ways of narrations. And the latter might have learned a great deal from the former, in terms of his creation of Nick. In the above discussion, it should be noted that Nick might be created from the two 'failures' in Cather's experiments: Jim Burden in *My Ántonia*, and Niel Herbert in *A Lost Lady*. That is to say, from the former, a detached narrator sometimes going too far, on the other hand, from the latter, an attached narrator witnessing everything. From those two experiments, Fitzgerald seems to create Nick Carraway who is going midway between them.