

## Nick Carraway as the narrator

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Remember, when you are reading the novel you are reading an account of one of the characters who was involved in what happened and is now in the process of writing it down. We are, essentially, reading a book about a man writing about a man.

In the *York Notes Advanced: The Great Gatsby* by Dr Julian Cowley, the author writes:

The book might bear Gatsby's name, but we should not underestimate the extent to which its enduring qualities result from Nick Carraway's narration. He presents himself as the writer of the story, a man with literary leanings since his days at Yale, and he is also a character in the novel, involved in the action. It is only through Nick that we know Gatsby; he is making him 'great' for us. But how does his style of writing – condensed, lyrical, aesthetically self-conscious – match his picture of himself, the thirty-year-old bond dealer, with thinning hair, and few opportunities for happiness or fulfillment? He talks in one breath of his mundane study of investments and securities, and in the next proclaims with romantic melancholy, 'At the enchanted metropolitan twilight I felt a haunting loneliness sometimes, and felt it in others' (Chapter 3). How should we read his own amorous involvements, especially that with Jordan Baker, in the light of the radiance his storytelling casts upon the obsessive love of Jay Gatsby for Daisy Fay? Such tensions in our sense of Nick Carraway are amongst the most intriguing issues generated by the novel, and play a major role in its enduring success as a work of literature.

*York Notes Advanced: The Great Gatsby* © Dr Julian Cowley, 1998

1. Discuss the extract above with a partner, summarise your understanding of it and decide whether you agree with Dr Cowley's comments. Be prepared to share your ideas with the rest of the class.
2. Do you agree that it is Nick who presents Gatsby as 'great'? If you do think so, why do you think he does so and if you don't think it is him, what is it about the story that makes Gatsby 'great'?
3. Do you consider Nick Carraway to be a reliable narrator? Explain your ideas.
4. How do we know whether or not Nick is telling the truth? He sometimes refers to what he can remember; what does this suggest about other parts of the story or even 'missing' elements or parts at which Nick was not present?
5. What is the connection between Nick Carraway and Gatsby? It is not enough to state that they were neighbours, why does Nick have such an interest in Gatsby?
6. Find the comments that Nick Carraway makes about himself. Why do you think he presents himself in this way? What did he do for a living whilst living next door to Gatsby? In what way might this be seen as ironic?
7. After Gatsby dies Nick declares how angry he is with all those who come to stare but surely he is an observer, even a voyeur, of Gatsby's life and death; he is the one who is, after all, writing a book about the events. What do you think of Nick's stance on this? Does it affect the way you view him?
8. Who do we learn more about from reading this novel: Jay Gatsby or Nick Carraway?