Secondary Characters as First-Person Narrators: A Study of Empathy

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Abstract

One of the greatest functions of literature is its ability to make readers attuned to the emotions of others. Specifically, literature promotes the practices of both empathy and sympathy. Point of view has a strong effect on how emotion is directed, and the secondary character as the first-person narrator functions as a literary device to direct the reader's sympathy toward an unlikable, fatally-flawed protagonist. Secondary characters draw the reader close to the emotional world of the narrative through an others-orientation, their status as survivor, and their relationship to the protagonist. Ishmael in *Moby Dick* and Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* both illustrate how this narrative style facilitates empathy for the narrator and sympathy for the protagonist.

Secondary Characters as First-Person Narrators: A Study of Empathy

Humans possess the remarkable ability to take on one another's psychological and emotional states: to empathize. The existence of empathy and its importance in authentic human connection is even more remarkable when one considers how it intersects with the world of literary fiction. Point of view in story plays a significant role in how empathy is experienced by the reader, and it has long been speculated that first-person point of view brings readers as close as possible to the emotional journey of the narrator. Knowing this, authors have discovered ways to manipulate point of view and narrative voice together to evoke a stronger emotional response from readers and to promote sympathy for characters that, perhaps, it would be difficult to understand otherwise. One such device is the secondary character as the first-person narrator, especially in a story with a protagonist so flawed that he is destined to die. This specific narrative device is designed to promote empathy for the narrator, which leads to increased sympathy for the protagonist. The secondary character as the first-person narrator provides readers with an enhanced, emotionally rich experience because of the character's position and role in the story of the fatally-flawed protagonist.

The secondary character as the first-person narrator is a narrative device that exists in a wide range of literature, though it is largely unstudied. Often, the usage of this narrative voice is paired with the death of the protagonist, which significantly heightens its emotional impact on readers. For example, Emily Brontë utilizes this narrative technique in her novel *Wuthering Heights,* which, paired with the death of her protagonist, draws readers ever closer to the narrative and the flawed characters depicted within. Because the existence of this narrative trend has gone largely unnoticed, its impact on empathy has likewise been neglected. Both *Moby Dick* and *The Great Gatsby* serve as examples of this principle applied to successful works of

literature; a specific focus on these two works illustrates the exceptional impact that this narrative perspective has on readers' empathic engagement with the story. To draw out the full significance of this narrative form, specific elements of each novel must be discussed in connection to sympathy and empathy, including the fatally-flawed protagonist and the need for the secondary character as narrator, the familiarity between the narrator and reader, the mimetic elements used throughout the novel, the emotional impact of the narrator as survivor, and the synthesis of sympathy and empathy through the lens of the secondary character. Both *Moby Dick* and *The Great Gatsby* utilize the interplay between empathy and sympathy to create a new, forgiving perspective toward the fated protagonist, effectively serving as powerful examples of a unique literary trend.

The Secondary Character as Narrator for the Fatally-Flawed Protagonist

Point of view in fiction, the lens through which the narrative is experienced, is inextricably intertwined with empathy and the subsequent emotions the readers experience. Empathy involves taking on a "psychological perspective and imaginatively [experiencing], to some degree or other, what [someone] experiences" (Coplan 143). Together, point of view and the human ability to empathize with others bring about the reality that to read is to experience. This deeply emotional enterprise reveals the best of humanity: the ability to care and to love. Point of view has a strong effect on how empathy may function within a given story; the scope of the narrative perspective will determine the extent to which the reader may emotionally connect to the characters and personally identify with them (Al-Alami 911). For instance, first-person point of view is usually preferred as the narrative method that brings the reader the closest, mentally, physically, and emotionally, to the character. First-person narrative voice provides "reader intimacy, [and] connection with the character's emotional state" (912) that promotes the

reader's empathic engagement with the story presented. It is important to note that "most theorists agree that purely externalized narration tends not to invite readers' empathy" (Keen 220), and, therefore, in the quest for heightened empathic engagement between reader and character, first-person narration is typically favored. Though some may have concerns that first-person point of view limits the possibility for the scope of narration, "these limitations draw readers deeply into the narrator's world" (Jago 54), allowing for a story as personal and immersive as it is compelling. The character the reader inhabits and views the fictional world through is another important factor in the connection between empathy and point of view; the makeup of this character, including their beliefs, flaws, and perspective on the world, and their role in the story will have a great effect on the reader's ability and inclination to empathize. For example, readers who are vastly different from the protagonist will have a difficult time empathizing with the character's unfamiliar experiences and emotions. Point of view and empathy are two elements of story that cannot be separated and that influence each other in complex ways.

Over the years, authors have found ways to intentionally manipulate point of view to create unique lenses through which to view the story, to change the emotional impact of the story, and perhaps even to increase empathic engagement in readers; one such narration style that has been used in significant works of literature is the secondary character as the first-person narrator. Although the role of first-person narrator is usually ascribed to the protagonist, in these stories, the protagonist is not the narrator. The protagonist and their journey are still the central focus of these narratives, but they are viewed through the secondary character's extra layer of consciousness. This narrative style creates a unique emotional dynamic between the reader, the narrator, and the protagonist; the sentiments of the secondary character toward the protagonist

will affect those of the reader toward both characters in different ways. In addition, this narrative style provides greater opportunities for empathy; the reader sympathizes with the protagonist and empathizes with the narrator who is simultaneously empathizing with the protagonist, creating complex layers of emotion that the reader contends with. The secondary character as the first-person narrator provides a rich emotional experience for readers as they navigate different levels of consciousness and empathy.

The Fatally-Flawed Protagonist

While first-person narration brings readers the closest to the character and their emotions, certain undesirable traits in narrators can discourage empathy. Negative or destructive characteristics such as selfishness, lust, or insanity could cause readers enough discomfort to deter them from empathizing with the characters, or perhaps from reading the story at all. Aristotle's term *hamartia* aptly describes a character who suffers from a tragic flaw; Robert R. Dyer further articulates Aristotle's concept by describing how "the character with *tragic flaw* is not only less than a perfect man, he is less satisfactory than the ordinary man we accept as standard, for under stress his flaw will cause his whole character to collapse" (659). This unstable, turbulent narrative voice dissuades readers from fully engaging with the narrative because they too stand on the edge of self-destruction if they identify too closely with the protagonist. Literary scholar and feminist critic Suzanne Keen observes that "sometimes the potential for character identification and readers' empathy *decreases* with sustained exposure to a particular figure's thoughts or voice" (219); these characters are so flawed that remaining in their mind's eye for an extended amount of time may drive readers away. Through her research, Keen discovered that "empathy that leads to sympathy is by definition others-directed, whereas an over-aroused empathic response that creates personal distress (self-oriented and aversive)

causes a turning away from the provocative condition of the other" (208). Witnessing the

inevitable yet distressing downfall of both the narrator and the protagonist may evoke an extreme

empathic response that inhibits readers instead of drawing them closer to the narrative and the

characters. For the purposes of this study, these novels' protagonists will be referred to as

"fatally-flawed" because their weaknesses ensure their ultimate demise.

    These protagonists in question, so flawed they disinvite empathy, are destined for a fatal

end in their respective novels; therefore, the existence of a survivor in their story is used as a

device to gain empathic perspective on these characters. Because these protagonists cannot

survive, they require another voice to finalize their story and to offer the reader an opportunity

for reflective empathy, and perhaps even forgiveness, after the protagonist's death. Although the

secondary character as the first-person narrator does not always coincide with the protagonist's

death, the usage of both literary devices at once impacts the readers' empathic engagement with

the narrative in significant ways. These secondary characters narrating the protagonist's story act

as outsiders observing the corrupt nature of humanity, telling a cautionary tale which can only

arise from the mouth of the survivor. Additionally, the protagonist's death acts as a clever device

to prompt further compassion; often, it is far easier to offer forgiveness and to feel sympathy for

someone in retrospect. The empathic connection between the narrator and the protagonist, even

after death, can heavily influence the reader's opinion of the protagonist; Dennis Class found that

"maintaining a connection with the deceased may be beneficial for the bereaved by providing a

source of solace for survivors" (qtd. in Root and Exline 2). The complexity of grief mingling

with regret and the possibility of forgiveness after death allows for a unique empathic connection

between the reader and the narrator. This narration style, coupled with the tragic fate of each

protagonist, relates significantly to the strong connection between empathy and point of view.

The Secondary Character as the Embodiment of the Reader

  The line between fiction and reality has always been blurred, as art so often imitates life. Mimicry within literature allows readers to draw close to any given narrative world, especially if the characters depicted are real enough that the reader can feasibly imagine themselves in their shoes. The concept of mimesis is radical and fundamental in the context of literature; it is the idea that literature is often the imitative representation of the real world. Robert Alter, in his study "Mimesis and the Motive for Fiction," describes *mimesis* as "never a direct reproduction of reality but rather a way of eliciting in the mind of the reader … the illusion of persons, places, situations, events, and institutions convincingly like the ones we encounter outside the sphere of reading" (238). Mimesis is integral to the human condition itself: we practice mimesis in memory, when "we remember that which we mentally re-present to ourselves" (Meltzer 10). Humans mimic each other in everyday life, each individual repeating and reliving actions, words, and emotions that have been experienced thousands of times in the past. In a real and profound way, all humans exist in attempted mimesis of their Creator. Meltzer refers to the Aristotelian belief that "to imitate is a natural human trait" (8); humans spend their entire lives steeped in imitation and unintentional mimicry. Therefore, mimesis is an essential characteristic of literature that connects readers both as individuals imagining a story as reality and humans relating to the process of re-creation.

  A unique form of mimesis occurs when this narrative technique is applied. Stories in their entirety are very rarely experienced solely by one individual; real life is punctuated by long periods of stasis and inaction and of observing instead of directly experiencing. Humans often find themselves as a minor character in the story of another, watching and learning from the experiences of those around them. The secondary character as the narrator mirrors the way

humans often glean information in their own personal lives: through multiple sources, and rarely firsthand. Readers also experience a unique kind of mimesis as they mimic the emotions of the secondary character toward the protagonist, that of an observer and a friend. Therefore, the secondary character as the first-person narrator functions as a unique form of literary mimesis itself.

Mimesis, as it is vital to the heart and function of the narrative, is deeply connected to the idea of familiarity of experience. Meltzer asserts that "mimesis lies in wait at the heart of psychoanalysis, since the concept of the Subject is tied to that of the identification, or lack thereof, with the other" (6). Because literature imitates reality, readers seek to connect to narrators that imitate, in some small way, their own experiences and emotions. Studies have proven that readers respond with heightened engagement to stories containing beliefs and attitudes like their own (Busselle and Bilandzic 327). One of the dangers of inhabiting the minds of unstable, unlikable characters is the potential for a disconnect between what the reader has experienced and what the narrator is experiencing; this disconnect can not only destroy empathy, but it can also deter readers from engaging with the literature at all. Through their extensive study on narrative point of view and familiarity of experience, Melissa Mulcahy and Bethanie Gouldthorp emphasized the importance of familiarity of experience:

> Readers reported significantly higher levels of story engagement after reading familiar passages than unfamiliar passages; familiarity of experience resulted in higher ratings of empathy with protagonist emotions, story interest, and readability; and participants also perceived the thoughts and behaviour, and the experience of the protagonist as it was described in the text, to be more similar to their own experience of the world when they read passages in the familiar condition. (118)

This concept applies specifically to the first-person point of view, as Mulcahy and Gouldthorp further surmise that readers who are familiar with the narrator's experiences and emotions will readily adopt the first-person perspective. Conversely, readers with dissimilar experiences prefer to experience the narrative through a third-person narrator to "avoid conflict between their experience of the events in the 'real world' and their experience of the narrative world" (101). Not only then is it crucial for the reader and narrator to have similar experiences for the purposes of empathic connection, but it also affects the reality of the fictional world itself. Mulcahy and Gouldthorp claim that readers who share similar experiences with the protagonist "perceived the story world to be more realistic" (101), and empathic engagement then becomes possible. Keen concludes through her study that "readers' judgments about the realism of the characters are supposed to have an impact on identification, and the similarity of the reader to the character is widely believed to promote identification" (217). Mimesis, similarity of experience, and the realism of the fictional world are all tied closely together to promote the empathic connection between the character and the reader.

Additionally, the morality of the narrator is an important element of their character that will either draw a reader closer to identification or will drive them away and cut off any possibility of empathic connection. When readers engage with a narrator who exhibits a lack of morality, they are far less likely to identify with the character or to extend any empathy toward them. Fernadez-Quintanilla discovered through her study on narrative empathy and reader responses that "moral evaluation and positioning [plays] a determining role in narrative empathy ... the availability of information about characters' mental states tends to facilitate empathy, but a negative moral evaluation can override the textual potential for empathy" (139). It is essential

then to consider that reader identification is most effective when the narrator possesses some

semblance of morality, which the fatally-flawed protagonist typically does not possess.

Inhabiting the mind of the secondary character eases the transition from the reader's life

to the life of a mundane, life-like character who readers will easily identify and empathize with,

especially when compared to the turbulent voice of the protagonist. Keen is very clear in the

conclusions of her study that "when large numbers of readers are consulted about their

empathetic reading experiences, a strong pattern emerges supporting the notion that character

identification lies at the heart of readers' empathy" (68). This empathic connection leads to

greater sympathy for those the reader may not understand, such as the protagonist. Readers are

entirely capable of feeling for someone dissimilar from themselves, and authors should never

endeavor to limit the possibility for the reader's intellectual and emotional growth; Mulcahy and

Gouldthorp admit that part of the benefit of reading literature is an immersion in story elements

that "transcend our everyday experience" (120), but these authors choose to take advantage of

the proven connection between the reader and the narrator when they share experiences and

emotions. Inhabiting the mind of a character that is emotionally, cognitively, and personally

aligned with the reader allows for the capacity to easily feel for someone different from

themselves. Although there are a variety of different characteristics that a reader might identify

with in a narrator, ultimately, the absence of the fatally-flawed protagonist's overwhelmingly

negative traits allows the reader to latch onto a quieter, ordinary character, providing the reader

with the opportunity to assimilate to their psyche, a feat they would find incredibly difficult in

the perspective of the protagonist. The reader may, in this situation, view the protagonist's

condition from afar and, in that necessary distance from the negative aspects of the protagonist's

character, find sympathy. The secondary character as narrator acts as a doorway for readers to access the world of the protagonist through a softer, kinder lens.

The Passive Narrator and the Archetypal Survivor

Because the fatally-flawed protagonists incur the disaster and ultimately perish because of it, the passive narrator proves to be the *archetypal survivor*. The secondary character as narrator rarely affects the larger action of the novel and is content in observing rather than participating. Keen claims that this narrator "scarcely does more than provide cues about character movements and speech" (225). The idea of stillness is important when this mode of narration is considered. Because the action of the novel often does not directly affect the narrator, there is ample room for self-contemplation in this type of literature (Koopman and Hakemulder 80), allowing the reader to be deeply immersed in the emotional and contemplative aspects of the fictional world. The opportunity to be still and to take in the world, distanced from the physical action but close to the story's emotional dimension, is an effective way to invite empathy. Koopman and Hakemulder's model proves that "literary and fictional narratives may evoke the type of aesthetic distance (stillness) that leads to a suspension of judgment, adding to a stronger experience of role-taking and narrative empathy" (80). Stillness is required for reflection to take place, and reflection is the indispensable prerequisite for empathy. The secondary character as the first-person narrator utilizes this idea of distance both to remove the reader from the negative influence of their volatile character and to allow space to consider the fullness of the fatally-flawed protagonist without being affected by their skewed self-perception. Koopman and Hakemulder believe that stillness and the subsequent reflection that must occur allows "time to let empathy emerge to its full extent" (101), which, when applied to this unique type of narration, promotes greater sympathy for the fated protagonist. While the inactivity of

these narrators may slow the story's pace in their quiet, contemplative observation, the unhurried nature of the narrative allows for a strong emotional connection to both the protagonist and the narrator.

The secondary character as narrator and survivor serves as a vessel for greater sympathy for the protagonist, whose flaws ensure their demise. The death of fictional characters alone, and especially of protagonists, have proven to trigger both emotional and intellectual responses in readers, such as mental replotting to construct a happier ending for the characters (Jensen et al. 86). William J. Brown further asserts that the death of a protagonist in literature impacts the readers who have formed "parasocial relationships" with these characters (127); therefore, these narratives are often so vivid and memorable that they persuasively communicate whatever message or warning the author intends for the reader. In this case, the agenda of the author is to open the door for greater empathic engagement between the reader and the narrator, and this is possible through the dual survival of the narrator and the reader who mirror one another as they wrestle with their grief for the protagonist. The existence of the survivor after the death of the protagonist provides a unique opportunity for stillness, reflection, and empathy, and the added emotional lens of the narrator heightens the emotional impact of the protagonist's death on the reader.

Others-Oriented Narratives

Narratives that utilize the archetypal survivor coupled with the secondary character as the first-person narrator are, in their pursuit to promote empathy, others-oriented. Empathy is the emotional work put forth to take on another's emotions, while sympathy is the act of feeling pity or compassion for another's plight. Keen claims that "empathy that leads to sympathy is by definition others-directed" (208). While first-person point of view fosters a self-centered

narrative perspective, the secondary character as the first-person narrator uses the personal voice to tell the story of another, ensuring that the story's focus is never limited to the speaker alone. Halpern insists that "there is a difference between self and other oriented perspective taking, and focusing on others instead of yourself may be the only way to have a true empathetic experience" (136). When readers engage in this complex act of taking on the perspective of a narrator who is solely focused on another, they are mentally trained to think of and care for others.

Narratives that utilize the secondary character as the first-person narrator effectively draw readers close enough to feel for the protagonist and their plight, but not close enough to be negatively impacted by their perspective. Halpern states that "other-oriented perspective taking is much less likely to cause aversive arousal and personal distress than self-oriented perspective taking" (138). When the narrator is oriented to care about and for another character in the story, the inevitable effect is that the needs and emotions of others are prioritized. Through the work of literary imagination, "readers learn to put themselves in the place of people they could not have known that intimately in any other way, thus deepening their understanding and compassion" (Koopman and Hakemulder 81). Inhabiting a perspective solely focused on others promotes emotional growth that allows readers to empathically engage with fictional characters and worlds.

The Synthesis of Sympathy and Empathy

Sympathy and empathy both play indispensable roles in the relationship between reader and literary characters, coloring the experience of reading itself with incredible emotional complexity. Though the term "empathy" appears common to modern readers and is often overused, it has not existed long in the English language. Koopman and Hakemulder found that "the term empathy only exists in English since the early twentieth century, introduced by

Tichener (1909) as a translation of the German, *Einfuhlung*. Before that time, the term sympathy

was used to denote processes of feeling the pain or joy of a fellow human being" (83). Because

they have not long existed as separate concepts, the two words are often mistakenly used

interchangeably. Scholars have toiled in recent years to solidify a distinct definition for the two

terms in relation to literature, finally concluding that empathy occurs when one experiences the

same emotions as another (a feeling with), whereas sympathy occurs when one feels concern for

another without sharing their exact emotions (feeling for) (Koopman and Hakemulder 83). Keen

describes the difference between empathy and sympathy as either saying "I feel your pain"

(empathy) or "I feel pity for your pain" (sympathy) (208). When empathizing, the reader

imaginatively experiences the mental and emotional states of the character, but to sympathize is

to simply have concern for the wellbeing of another (Coplan 145). Empathy is far more complex

than sympathy because the reader must attempt to "simulate the target's psychological states"

(145), whether it is a conscious effort or not. While empathy and sympathy both involve

emotional connection, it would be a mistake to treat them as identical sensations, ignoring their

nuances and the implications each has for the way readers may relate to a given narrative.

　　　　While it could be argued that all literature promotes empathy between the reader and the

characters, the secondary character as the first-person narrator specifically facilitates a synthesis

of empathy and sympathy to create a unique and complex emotional experience for the reader.

Amy Coplan asserts that "empathy is consistent with indifference" (145), which communicates

the idea that empathy (a feeling with) does not always lead to real compassion and sympathy

from the reader (a feeling for). It is possible, though undesirable, to experience empathy without

feeling any accompanying compassion or sympathy. Often, the preferences and concerns of the

reader do not align with those of the characters, which could easily constitute an empathic

barrier; Keen argues that "even when we care about the characters, we do not necessarily want them to get what they want" (147). Therefore, empathy for the sensible, mundane secondary character provides a solution to the problem of empathy without sympathy, allowing for a strong connection between reader and narrator, even blurring the lines between the two.

Inhabiting the mind and sharing the emotions of the secondary character as the first-person narrator provides the perfect opportunity to experience both sympathy and empathy at once. The reader experiences empathy for the narrator, feeling what they feel while they inhabit their perspective. Simultaneously, the narrator experiences empathy for the protagonist. Because of the reader's empathic connection to the narrator and the narrator's connection to the protagonist, the reader can feel sympathy for the fatally-flawed protagonist, facilitated by the narrator's emotional and personal connection to the protagonist. Although it is fascinating to explore the differences between sympathy and empathy and the interplay between the two, Faye Halpern expresses that an over-emphasis on the distinction between sympathy and empathy, "though it offers clarity by allowing us to break down a complex phenomenon, might obscure how feeling-for and feeling-with often work together in a sympathetic response" (137), and this is made clear when the effects of sympathy and empathy are fused with the use of the secondary character as narrator. This mode of narration marries the emotional impact of sympathy and empathy, creating a rich emotional experience for the reader.

The ability readers have to extend both empathy and sympathy toward fictional characters is already extraordinary, but the emotional and intellectual work put forth by the reader is compounded by the use of the secondary character as the first-person narrator. Empathy is an incredible phenomenon that demands much from the person experiencing it; Coplan defines the process of empathy as an integration of "cognitive and affective processes, creating a

complex and dynamic psychological experience that draws on different capacities we have for connecting and responding to the world and those in it" (143). Coplan describes the experience of empathy as literally "role-taking" or "perspective taking" (144), indicating the heavy amount of emotional and intellectual work at play in taking on the perspective of the secondary character. When the reader imaginatively takes on the perspective and emotions of the secondary character, they fictionally occupy the role of someone who experiences empathy for the protagonist. Imagination is the key ingredient to empathy, which is why imaginative arts such as literature provide the perfect opportunity to exercise and strengthen that emotional muscle; in the case of the secondary character as first-person narrator, there are several layers of imaginative empathy happening simultaneously, heightening the work the reader must put in to stay engaged and absorbed in the narrative. Koopman claims reading itself is "a conversation between narrator and reader: when we try to understand a character in a book, we make similar inferences about what the other is thinking and feeling as in conversation, and making such inferences would increase our understanding of and identification with the character" (97). The simple act of reading holds the power to draw the reader into a dynamic conversation, a relationship, with the narrator whose perspective they share. However, in the case of this unique narrative model, the reader engages in this intellectual exercise with two different characters at once: both the protagonist and the narrator, doubling both the intellectual effort and the emotional impact for the reader. The secondary character as the first-person narrator, surviving to tell the story of the fatally-flawed protagonist, provides the reader with a complex but rewarding emotional experience in which they experience both sympathy and empathy at once.

Narrative Form Applied to *Moby Dick*

Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick* has been immortalized as one of the greatest works of literary fiction, and as such has been subject to extensive critique over the years. Melville's narrator who declares "call me Ishmael" (1) has been given much critical attention; although he famously calls attention to himself at the beginning of the novel, he, remarkably, all but disappears from the narrative after the introduction. Melville's choice to utilize a secondary character as the first-person narrator of his novel radically alters the way readers view the fatally-flawed protagonist, Captain Ahab, and his descent into madness. Ishmael's perspective of Ahab may ultimately allow the reader to use their empathic connection with Ishmael to gain sympathy for the mad captain and to contend with the emotional dimensions of the novel on a deeper level.

The Uninhabitable Protagonist: Captain Ahab

The protagonist of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* serves as the perfect example of a fatally-flawed protagonist that, if the readers were privy to his mind, would prevent readers from engaging empathically or sympathetically with the story. Captain Ahab is a man consumed by his thirst for revenge; he allows the loss of his leg to the whale to determine the trajectory of his future, whether or not the whale is a threat to him any longer. In nearly every sense of the word, Ahab is "mad" (Melville 242); he is completely driven by his imagined war with Moby Dick. Ahab's first mate, Starbuck, in his last words to his captain cries out, "See! Moby-Dick seeks thee not. It is thou, thou, that madly seekest him!" (815). Impassioned by his hatred, Ahab is described as a "demagogue" (King 344); he is a leader who abuses his power and leads his men to their untimely demise. Ahab cares more about satisfying his personal, irrational vendetta than protecting the lives of his crew, or even his own life. Ahab's fatal flaw is his madness, and it leads him not only to murder his entire crew, but to commit suicide in his attempt to satisfy his

bloodlust: King describes in gory detail how "Ahab hangs himself with his own rope in the act of attacking the animal" (345). A man whose mind is so wildly distorted that he drives an entire group of men to their unnecessary deaths would be an incredibly difficult narrator to follow, let alone to extend any genuine empathy or sympathy toward. In choosing to portray a protagonist so far removed from sense, reality, and sanity, Melville's narrative necessitates a voice of reason to tell the fatal story of the madman, and to provide opportunity for understanding and perhaps even sympathy.

Ishmael as the Embodiment of the Reader

Ishmael, in his passivity, is the embodiment of the reader. Ishmael is known for being an extremely passive narrator, one who merely exists in the background, observing the action aboard the *Pequod* and rarely involving himself in the main events of the novel's plot. Following the novel's short inception and the departure of the *Pequod*, Ishmael "seems to disappear, or at least gradually fade, into the role of narrator" (Dumm 402). In this way, Ishmael functions as merely an observer in another's story, a mirror of the reader's role; the reader is incapable of impacting the story through physical action, and Ishmael forfeits his ability to exert influence over the storyline by choosing to act as a passive observer. Dumm further confirms Ishmael's limited physical role in the story through his label as a "witnessing narrator" (402), a fly on the wall with little physical influence over the events of the narrative. Although a reader has little to no physical responsibility apart from observing, their mental and emotional responsibility is vast. In every literary context, the reader must shoulder the burden of the emotional worlds of every character involved, but particularly the protagonist and/or narrator. When the secondary character and the narrator are one, they perfectly mimic the emotional weight that the reader

already would have borne; therefore, the emotional impact upon the reader is doubled, increasing

both the emotional impact and the mimetic implications of this narrative form.

       In choosing Ishmael as the first-person narrator, Melville creates a character that readers

can easily identify with, promoting empathy and laying the foundation for sympathy for the

protagonist. Especially in comparison to Ahab and his madness, Ishmael appears to readers as an

ordinary, even life-like character. Ishmael has nothing more sinister lurking beneath his skin than

a restlessness, and an itch to get back to the sea. Ishmael establishes his similarity with readers

on the very first page of the novel: "Almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish

very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me" (Melville 1-2). In stark contrast to

Ahab, Ishmael describes his surrender to the call of the sea as "quietly tak[ing] to the ship" (1),

drawing himself ever closer to the silent reader, perpetually still. Melville establishes Ishmael as

the antithesis of Ahab, and the picture of the quiet, ordinary reader. Ishmael calls himself a

"simple sailor" (5) and denies any desire to rise in the ranks aboard the *Pequod,* imitating the

readers' own limited mobility within the story. Details like these establish foundational

similarities between Ishmael and the readers that significantly blur the lines between the two.

       Another important way in which Ishmael proves himself comparable to the reader is his

eagerness to find companionship and emotional connection in the characters around him.

Ishmael cherishes the idea of being connected to his companions, and in Chapter 94, Ishmael

articulates that connection as he squeezes the sperm alongside his companions:

> I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers' hands in it, mistaking their hands
>
> for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this
>
> squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say,—
>
> Oh! My dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities … Come;

let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us squeeze ourselves into each other; let us

squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness. (Melville 601)

Ishmael contemplates with considerable depth the idea of unity with his fellow man as he finds

himself lost in the bliss of knowing another. This is an essential, and intentional, choice on

Melville's part to draw the readers closer to Ishmael as they, too, long to connect to these

strangers on the page and to feel that life-giving bond of human connection. Because Ishmael

tells this story after the crew's tragic fate, he knows just how short-lived these connections will

be, yet he still chooses to communicate the beauty and importance of companionship. In a

similar way, readers desire to experience an authentic, emotional connection with characters

who, for them, exist only for a short time within the confines of literary fiction, and will forever

be lost to them upon the completion of the novel. Both Ishmael and the reader perhaps

unconsciously share the idea that true companionship and emotional connection can transcend

time, and even reality.

Ishmael's genuine desire for companionship is further proof that Ahab, as the antithesis

to Ishmael in almost every way, would have destroyed this beautiful expression of human

connection and disinvited any sympathetic or empathic engagement with the characters of *Moby

Dick*. Ahab proves himself throughout this story to be a loner, one who is closed off completely

to relationship with his crew. Ahab "rarely engages in any communication with his crew, which

makes a striking contrast with the novel's narrator, the sociable Ishmael" (Furui 599). He is

completely resistant to the "network of human relations" (599) that Ishmael promotes. Ahab

keeps himself secluded for much of the novel, subjecting himself to isolation to maintain focus

on his terrible purpose (599). He is so entirely consumed by his burning need for revenge that he

closes himself off to all possibility of human connection, making his role as narrator an

impossibility if the story is to involve any real emotional connection between the reader and the story world. In Chapter 34, "The Cabin-Table," Ishmael explains that "in the cabin was no companionship; socially, Ahab was inaccessible" (219). But while Ahab is completely inaccessible, Ishmael is ingrained so deeply into the shared consciousness of the crew that he even attempts to reach out in sympathetic understanding to Ahab through his narrative voice. It is only through Ishmael's perspective that readers can attempt to understand and extend sympathy toward the man, detached and wildly dissimilar from the reader.

Mimesis in *Moby Dick*

Though the idea of mimesis is woven through the very existence of the secondary character as the first-person narrator, Melville incorporates intentional mimetic elements throughout the novel to draw the reader closer to the text and the characters within. Meltzer in his book *Salome and the Dance of Writing: Portraits of Mimesis in Literature*, explores the deep connection between mimetic expression and paintings within literature, claiming that "it is the portrait of itself that literature paints when it conjures up a version of the painted arts" (1). It is the entire crux of the book that paintings, and specifically portraits, within a literary world act as a mimetic reflection of the story and the characters within. This is an eerily accurate claim to make when one considers the function of the painting at Spouter-Inn in Chapter 3, one of the most profound mimetic images in *Moby Dick,* which Putz calls an "effigy" (163). Though Ishmael is initially unsure what to make of the painting, after much debate, he decides it must represent "a Cape-Horner in a great hurricane, the half-foundered ship weltering there with its three dismantled masts alone visible; and an exasperated whale, purposing to spring clean over the craft, is in the enormous act of impaling himself upon the three mast-heads" (Melville 17). The conclusion Ishmael draws is strikingly reminiscent of the novel's dramatic climax,

seemingly prophesying the disaster and the death to come. Though not entirely accurate in terms

of the novel's ending, the painting contains a clearly mimetic quality in that it reflects its own

world and speaks to what the characters in that world will soon experience.

   In addition to the mimetic quality of being self-referential, the passage also draws

reflective parallels between the emotions of Ishmael and the readers themselves. Although

readers may be preoccupied by the contents of the painting and its similarity to the novel's

events, Ishmael's emotional reaction to the piece is the central focus of the passage (Putz 162).

To support this mimetic connection between narrator and reader, Melville chooses not only to

utilize the present tense to provide readers with a sense of immediacy, but also to use "the

indefinite pronoun *you*, thus providing a grammatical link between Ishmael and the reader of the

novel" (Putz 163). As he observes a microcosm reflective of his own world, Ishmael mirrors the

readers' own emotions as they digest the monstrous fictional world before them. Putz describes

Ishmael's reaction as a model that anticipates readers' responses to the novel as a whole: "What

better summary is there of the confusions and irritations, of the speculations, doubts, ambitions,

and critical insights, of the ironies and pitfalls, of the rejections and the allegorical searchings

Moby-Dick itself has triggered off among its readers and critics?" (163). Ishmael and the readers

embark on emotional journeys parallel to one another, and passages such as these draw the

reader and the narrator close enough to engage empathically with one another. Using a single

painting that only occupies a few small pages of Melville's gargantuan novel, readers gain an

emotional connection to a rich fictional world that creatively reflects both itself and the physical

world of the reader.

The Emotional Impact of Ishmael as Survivor

Ishmael's function in *Moby Dick* is to provide the testimony of a survivor: without Ishmael's survival, the story would not exist. Of the narrators discussed, Ishmael is the most traditional example of a survivor, but there are implications that must be considered in his narration. Monumental implications arise if these survivor-narrators are assumed to have written these stories after the conclusion of the tragedy and after the emotional and psychological damage has been inflicted. Carl F. Strauch aptly states that "as the survivor Ishmael has the advantage of hindsight in his narrative … it is scarcely surprising that one horrific, all-engulfing moment should color preceding events and states of feeling" (469). Some critics insist that Ishmael functions as a prophetic narrator (Gallagher 11), but if Melville is striving for realism in his novel to allow readers easy emotional engagement, a narrator who retrospectively communicates the events of the novel creates a story that is both plausible and sympathetic. Reno states that "*Moby-Dick* must be read backwards from the vortex, from the disaster … [and] so must Ishmael's character" (8). In retelling his traumatic experience, Ishmael embodies "a mind seeking to understand the chaos of what he has lived through" (2), and in doing so, looks upon his world with greater wisdom and compassion. It is worth consideration that one is inclined to think on the dead with greater understanding and sympathy; remorse is a powerful emotion, and it is likely that for the survivor, this post-mortem perspective colors their interpretation of the protagonist's actions following their fated death. If the reader absorbs the totality of the narrator's past and future insight, the reader will draw empathically closer to the narrator and, hopefully, will adopt the narrator's stubbornly sympathetic perspective of the fated protagonist.

Ishmael's Others-Oriented Narrative

As Ishmael is the survivor of another's story, his point of view captures the idea that the secondary character as narrator, and specifically the survivor, necessitates a view of their world that is others-focused. Ishmael's focus on others is double; not only does he point back to the reader as a reflection of the self, blurring the lines of consciousness between reader and narrator, but he is also absorbed by the characters around him. John Young describes Ishmael's narrative voice as a synthesis between memory and imagination, which he uses to "[penetrate] into the minds of Ahab and other characters" (98). The intensity of Ishmael's other-orientation has been criticized by scholars who claim that his perspective is warped, unrealistic, and frighteningly unreliable; some make drastic claims that Ishmael does not exist and characters such as Pip are the narrator in disguise (Dumm 413). The primary critique of Ishmael's first-person perspective is his frequent, inexplicable knowledge of events he did not witness, such as his knowledge of Ahab and Starbuck's private conversation in Chapter 132, "The Symphony." This odd narrative form "fails either to cohere on its own terms or to transmit a sense of a singular consciousness communicating it" (Fee 137). Fee further describes this odd style of narration in which Ishmael knows far more than he should as a "violation of mimesis" (141). Although knowledge like this could lead the audience to distrust Ishmael as a narrator, when Ishmael's status as the lone survivor is reevaluated and the emotional impact of such an event is considered, his convoluted retelling of his story can be reinterpreted. In this context, Ishmael's narrative consists of the words of a broken man, adrift and struggling to find meaning in his experience, using his intellect and his compassion to draw personal portraits of the men he knew and the men he lost.

Ishmael's perspective is so oriented on those around him that he tells the story often as an omniscient narrator, peering into the minds, emotions, and solitary moments of those around

him. Young calls this Ishmael's "creative reminiscence" (103); Ishmael uses his imagination,

heightened by the emotional impact of his recent loss, to fill in the gaps of his story and to draw

closer to these characters, even after their deaths. This imaginative movement of Ishmael's

perspective not only draws the reader closer to the other characters of *Moby Dick*, but it once

again invites the reader to draw ever closer to the narrator: Young describes how "as readers, we

feel as though we are called upon to take part in this imaginative process" (103). In an attempt to

draw closer to his dead comrades, Ishmael brings the reader nearer to characters such as Ahab

who would hardly exist in the story at all if Ishmael had told only what he directly experienced.

Empathy and Sympathy for the Fatally-Flawed Protagonist

Established in familiarity with Ishmael and having experienced empathy for the narrator,

readers are prompted to extend their sympathy toward the turbulent protagonist. If the story were

told through a third-person perspective, it is likely that Ahab's flaws would overpower the

reader's capacity to feel sympathy for his fatal downward spiral, but Ishmael's perspective, both

factual and imaginative in equal parts, paints Ahab in a tragic light. Ishmael uses the character of

Starbuck as a clever device to draw closer to a character he had few interactions with. Starbuck

acts as Ishmael's bridge, teasing out the depth of Ahab's character through the perspective of a

trusted friend. It is in the sole confidence of Starbuck that the readers learn that "for forty years

has Ahab forsaken the peaceful land, for forty years to make war on the horrors of the deep!"

(Melville 776). As a careful observer, Ishmael draws on what he has learned about both Ahab

and Starbuck to provide readers with a glimpse of Ahab's humanity.

Ishmael, the learned scholar who is not tied so personally to the character of Ahab, sees

his plight as tragic and sympathetic, but also well-deserved; after all, Ahab is a "monomaniac"

(287) and the primary cause of the death of every man aboard the *Pequod,* save Ishmael himself.

Ishmael "sees profoundly what Starbuck cannot see—Ahab through all epochs assaulting cosmic

injustice" (Strauch 474). Therefore, Ishmael does his best to portray Ahab as both the monster

and the man. There are certainly moments in which Ishmael speaks of Ahab as a murderer and a

maniac; his desperate inner voice pleads for a reversal of Ahab's character and a different fate

for the innocent men aboard the *Pequod*, already set in stone. He depicts Ahab's uncontrollable

temper and his sudden violence against Boomer on the *Samuel Enderby,* and he records the

English captain's exclamation, "Is your captain crazy?" (Melville 636). Ishmael further describes

Ahab's icy demeanor as he listens to the earnest request of Captain Gardiner to help look for his

missing whale-boat, upon which his son was lost (760). Though Gardiner appeals to the fact that

Ahab too has a young son safe at home, Ahab "still stood like an anvil, receiving every shock,

but without the least quivering of his own" (761). Ahab is depicted through Ishmael's voice as

resolutely unfeeling and devoid of all compassion.

Despite Ishmael's honesty, his gaze upon the madman is often sorrowful, or even

forgiving. In Chapter 132, Ishmael reveals Ahab's raw, emotional turmoil: "From beneath his

slouched hat Ahab dropped a tear into the sea; nor did all the Pacific contain such wealth as that

one wee drop" (Melville 775). These rare pictures of the madman's humanity provide Ahab's

character with radical depth, despite his madness. Even if this moment is completely fictitious, as

one may be tempted to think since Ishmael himself is not present during this scene, it only

further proves the kindness of Ishmael's reminiscent, imaginative perspective on a man who

clearly does not deserve his forgiveness. Strauch claims that "Ishmael sympathizes almost to the

point of toppling his own reason, drawing back just in time from psychological self-destruction"

(474). Ishmael successfully balances what he deeply knows is true of Ahab's fatal flaws with his

tortured humanity, offering his readers the opportunity to sympathize with a man killed by his own obsession.

One clear, thematic way in which Ishmael retrospectively empathizes with Ahab, allowing the reader to sympathize with Ahab by extension, is in their parallel experiences of intense solitude and loneliness. It is the emotional burden of Ahab's "lonely individualism" (Furui 600) that draws Ahab and Ishmael inextricably together. Ahab, reflecting the "age of individualism" rampant in nineteenth century America (600), embraces his self-induced solitude aboard the *Pequod* for the sake of his revenge on the whale. Though Ahab is the sole cause of his isolation and separation from humanity, Ishmael communicates to the reader the depth of Ahab's emotional turmoil with honesty and even understanding. Ahab is isolated from his crew, his family (Melville 776), and even the White Whale himself, the object of his obsession (Furui 603). Only a few short chapters before Ahab meets his nemesis and secures his fate, he confesses in the confidence of Starbuck that his entire life has been marked by "the desolation of solitude" (Melville 776). Because Melville's chosen narrator is no stranger to loneliness, the desperately lonely dimensions of Ahab's soul are explicitly communicated in a way that would have been impossible from another narrator's perspective. When Ishmael decides to board the *Pequod,* there is a "damp, drizzly November in [his] soul" (1). Despite his every valiant attempt to connect to the men around him, in the end, Ishmael returns to an existence of solitude made deeper by his loss, ultimately tying him closely to Ahab's perpetual isolation.

Although Ahab causes Ishmael's ultimate isolation, Ishmael has the strength and understanding to look upon Ahab with compassion, ultimately allowing the readers to adopt a sympathetic view of the madman. Because Ishmael's narrative voice is colored by the loneliness and solitude of his sole survival, *Moby Dick* "emerges as a novel narrated by a lonely castaway

who, because of his own loneliness, stands in a privileged position to peep into rare moments of

his captain's loneliness" (Furui 612). The loneliness of Ishmael's survival is parallel to the

loneliness of Ahab's entire existence, and in the senseless destruction of himself and those

around him, Ahab reshapes Ishmael into an image of himself. Strauch aptly describes the

emotional connection between the two characters: "Surely, these two are intimately related: the

lesser, Ishmael, sharing the whole range of feeling in the greater, Ahab" (474). Because of this

emotional connection between Ahab and Ishmael, the reader is allowed a glimpse into Ahab's

emotion and humanity, thus dramatically increasing the likelihood of a sympathetic view of the

fatally-flawed protagonist.

Narrative Form Applied to *The Great Gatsby*

The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald is a tale known and loved, heralded as a classic

by many. As it is so successful and widely studied, much attention has been paid to the unique

narrative voice of Nick Carraway, and the way his position in the story alters the reader's

perspective of Jay Gatsby, the fatally-flawed protagonist. Nick's role in Gatsby's story is unique

as he is both survivor and friend, telling the story of Gatsby's glamorous life through the lens of

an honest friend, privy to the personal details of Gatsby's life that paint him neither as a hero nor

a villain, but as someone conquered by his desire for the unattainable American Dream. Though

some critics speculate that Nick's close personal connection to Gatsby proves his unreliability as

a narrator, Nick's empathy for Gatsby ultimately allows for the reader's sympathetic view of the

protagonist.

The Uninhabitable Protagonist: Jay Gatsby

Jay Gatsby, mysterious, distant, and isolated, is so consumed by his desires and so riddled

with flaws that he proves emotionally and mentally inaccessible to readers, requiring the

secondary character to relay his story from a healthy distance. Eerily parallel to Ahab and his monomania, Gatsby is entirely fixated on Daisy and his desire to relive the passionate romance of their past. Gatsby socially and emotionally isolates himself with the singular goal of winning Daisy's affections, and he neglects all other aspects of his character, including his morality, to achieve his goal. Thomas Hanzo accurately describes how Gatsby "decided too early what he wanted and strove for it with a determination which subordinated all other demands" (184). It would be extremely difficult to inhabit the perspective of a protagonist so entirely cut off from humanity, especially when compared to the sociable Nick Carraway who naturally infuses the reader in the action of the story; Gatsby is oddly absent from much of the novel's central events, often appearing more as an idea than a character. Additionally, Gatsby's idealization and adoration for Daisy obscures the truth of the narrative. In Chapter 5, as Gatsby leads Daisy around his mansion, he is so entranced by her presence that he "revalued everything in his house according to the measure of response it drew from her well-loved eyes," and he appeared to be in a dazed stupor because "in her actual and astounding presence none of it was any longer real" (Fitzgerald 86). Daisy controls Gatsby's mind and heart so entirely that reality itself changes in her presence. Through Gatsby's perspective, not only would readers perceive a false image of Daisy, flawless despite her crimes and her cowardice, but they would also lose the honest view of Gatsby himself that Nick faithfully provides.

The reader may ultimately extend sympathy toward Gatsby only in truthfully comprehending both his merits and his faults, and inhabiting the perspective of a compulsive liar would only sow distrust and perhaps even aversion between Gatsby and the reader. Hanzo reminds the readers that "Gatsby is without conscience except perhaps where Daisy is concerned" (83), and he is constantly bending the truth to fit his fancy. As the people in Gatsby's

life are continually attempting to discern the truth of his experience, it is obvious that Gatsby

"cannot be trusted, creating elaborate fictionalized accounts of his youth comparable to the

outlandish stories created about him by complete strangers" (Palladino 29). Ultimately, Gatsby

deceives even Daisy, the only basis of his tenuous morality; Nick relates how Gatsby "had

certainly taken [Daisy] under false pretenses … he had deliberately given Daisy a sense of

security; he let her believe that he was a person from much the same strata as herself—that he

was fully able to take care of her" (Fitzgerald 130). Such a narrator would make determining the

truth of the story impossible, and the possibility of extending sympathy to such a narrator

unthinkable. Only through Nick's honest eyes can the readers glean any truth amidst a cast of

perpetual liars, and only in that truth can the reader extend genuine sympathy toward the

complicated protagonist.

Nick Carraway as the Embodiment of the Reader

In comparison to Gatsby's wild persona, Nick is the mundane, life-like character that

readers can easily identify with, ultimately facilitating empathy between the reader and the

narrator. After describing Gatsby's tendency to isolate and his uncanny obsession with Daisy,

Hanzo perfectly encapsulates the stark contrast between the two men by stating, "Nick makes

friends easily, his life is ordinary, and he is quite sane" (183). Nick seems determined, especially

in contrast with the rest of the novel's eclectic cast, to establish his own normality and the

potential for familiarity with the reader. Though he comes from a prominent family, Nick

himself is relatively unimportant and has not yet established himself in the world; he drifts east

with some vague intent to join the bond business, influenced only by his family's wishes

(Fitzgerald 20). He has "no purposes, he thinks of no powers to realize" (Hanzo 183). He

describes himself as "slow thinking and full of interior rules that act as brakes on [his] desires"

(Fitzgerald 61), a statement that completely contrasts him from the self-indulgent crowd he surrounds himself with. Additionally, Nick portrays his involvement in Gatsby's story as purely accidental. His home's proximity to Gatsby was simply "a matter of chance" (21), and the secret confidences he often found himself in were, he claims, "unsought" (19). Nick's self-description allows his readers to believe that this story could have happened to anyone.

Nick possesses a strong sense of morality as a narrator which significantly promotes reader identification. Nick famously begins his narration by claiming that "reserving judgements is a matter of infinite hope" (Fitzgerald 19), and yet Nick has much to rightly judge throughout the narrative. Nearly every character Nick is introduced to displays an appalling lack of morality, or even basic human decency. Jordan is a perpetual liar who cheats to advance her career. Tom is an adulterer and an extremely violent man, breaking the nose of his mistress when she mentions the wife he is actively deceiving (Fitzgerald 45). Daisy is a vain woman who uses the people around her, ultimately concerned only with her own happiness and comfort, made a murderer by her cowardice. Gatsby, it seems, is a combination of the destructive traits of the upper class; not only is he a perpetual liar, obsessed with his own material satisfaction, but he is also described as "a force of corruption: a criminal, a bootlegger, and an adulterer" (Will 126). Will argues that the "obscene" word scrawled across Gatsby's doorstep after his death is an accurate reflection of the obscenity of his entire life (128). The immoral cast of characters in *The Great Gatsby* necessitates a narrator who has some semblance of morality and honesty.

Though he is surrounded by characters guided by their immoral whims and outlandish desires, Nick repeatedly proves that he is sensible and decent and that he holds himself to some sort of moral standard. He is the only character who has a proper reaction to Myrtle Wilson's death and Gatsby's lack of remorse; when Gatsby reports that nobody saw them return to West

Egg, Nick "disliked [Gatsby] so much by this time that [he] didn't find it necessary to tell him he was wrong" (126). Although Nick may have prefaced his tale with the claim that he would withhold his moral judgment, there are hints throughout of Nick's prevailing concept of goodness that guides his thinking and his perspective of those around him; this faint grasp on truth and morality is exactly what makes Nick a narrator that readers may empathize with. Readers can feel their own emotions mirrored when they read of Nick's revulsion at the sight of "Myrtle Wilson, her life violently extinguished, knelt in the road and mingled her thick, dark blood with the dust" (121). While Nick is far from a saint, he aptly calls himself "one of the few honest people [he has] ever known" (61), and his narrative voice is one that readers can both relate to and trust. Of every immoral character in *The Great Gatsby,* Nick Carraway is the closest readers will get to a character that mirrors their own thought patterns and emotions.

Mimesis in *The Great Gatsby*

The Great Gatsby is rife with mimetic images that draw the readers closer to the reality of the narrative world and allow for a stronger emotional connection to the story; the primary way in which the narrative draws on mimetic elements is Nick's function as both narrator and friend. The transformation in Nick's perspective toward Gatsby is reflective of the readers' shifting perspective of a literary character throughout their time knowing them, even if this flawed character makes no definitive change for the better. Hanzo states that Gatsby learned nothing until his doom was secured (184), at which point his window of opportunity for genuine change had closed. Despite Gatsby's dogged determination to make Daisy love him again and his continual neglect of morality, Nick remains beside him and, after Gatsby's death, claims him as his "close friend" (Fitzgerald 145). Readers, too, tend to view literary characters as their companions after imaginatively walking alongside them and emotionally responding to their

struggles. Readers may also be tempted to blot out the "obscene word" and, though they

recognize its truth, their time spent with these characters may provide them with the same feeling

of closeness that Nick feels for Gatsby, though he only knew him for three short months. Nick's

relationship with Gatsby itself is a glimpse into the reader's relationship with any fictional

character: acquainted for only a short time, but forever changed because of the experience of

knowing them.

Meltzer's claim that paintings, and specifically portraits, often function as mimetic

symbols within literature can be applied to Fitzgerald's novel to reveal mimetic images. The

billboard that depicts the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg, a haunting, recurring image throughout the

novel, effectively functions as a mimetic symbol that is both self-reflective and that mirrors the

role of the reader. This dilapidated, unsettling billboard looms over the city and is mentioned at

pivotal points throughout the narrative. The only distinguishable feature of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg's

face are his great, piercing eyes, which, "dimmed a little by many paintless days under sun and

rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground" (Fitzgerald 35). In a similar way, Nick himself

broods over the state of West Egg and its inhabitants, constantly inhabiting the position of the

silent observer. The reader, empathically connected to Nick, is also invited to gaze upon the

moral ruin of a society obsessed with the ephemeral world. Nick describes Eckleburg's

"persistent stare" (Fitzgerald 36) that he and Tom are subject to, establishing Eckleburg's role as

a quiet but judgmental observer, unable to influence the action of the novel, but a solemn and

critical presence nonetheless. While Nick mirrors this state of inaction because of the passive

nature of his character, the readers are physically unable to exert any influence over the events of

the novel. George Wilson interprets the eyes as a "God" who "sees everything" (138) and passes

moral, perhaps even divine judgment upon those under his gaze. Similarly, part of Nick's role as

the narrator is to judge the actions of the surrounding characters and to "see everything" for what

it is. The eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg serve as a mimetic reflection of both Nick and the reader's

role in a story where they have no real power except to observe and to judge, effectively drawing

readers deeply into the fictional world.

The Emotional Impact of Nick Carraway as Survivor

Nick inhabits a significant place in the narrative he creates; as narrator, friend, and

survivor at once, Nick has the power to twist the narrative any way he likes. He could have

chosen to turn Gatsby into a villain, but instead Nick takes all he has learned about Gatsby and

presents it to the readers in a way that acknowledges his flaws in tandem with his humanity and

desperate desires, prompting sympathy from readers. Nick's narrative voice reveals his desire to

think well of his friend after death, even if he knew deeply of his flaws in life. Some critics have

even accused Nick's narrative voice of treating Gatsby too kindly following his death, and in

blotting out the "obscene word," some think that Nick himself blots out the memory of Gatsby's

flaws (Will 127). In truth, it is this reminiscent view of Gatsby's character, his choices, and his

life that allows Nick space for contemplation, to fully realize the dichotomy between greatness

and destruction at war under Gatsby's skin and to put into words that Gatsby was somehow both

"everything for which [Nick] has an unaffected scorn" (Fitzgerald 20) and "worth the whole …

bunch" (134). Only in his status as survivor can Nick contemplate the whole of his acquaintance

with Gatsby with both honesty and sorrow, knowing that his friend's dream would never be

fulfilled. Nick knows he will forever live in the wake of Gatsby's unfulfilled dream, and this

knowledge allows Nick to empathize with Gatsby years after his death.

Because of Nick's position as a survivor and the timeline of his authorship, he

manipulates the narrative's order of information to provide readers with an awareness of

Gatsby's full character earlier than Nick himself was. In Chapter 6, Nick reveals Gatsby's

humble backstory amidst his whirlwind reunion with Daisy, whom he has just impressed with his

vast wealth only pages before. Nick uses the revelation of Gatsby's true past to both disgust and

entrance his readers, which was a mirror of Nick's opinion of Gatsby at the time. Nick, and the

reader by extension, would be repelled by his "self-absorption" (Fitzgerald 92) but sympathetic

toward the realization that "his heart was in a constant, turbulent riot" (92). The timing of this

revelation is striking: while Daisy has just been awed by the empire Gatsby has built for himself

and the appearance of greatness, Nick reveals to his readers the unsavory truth of the money's

source, though he himself would not know until the night before Gatsby's death. The readers

suddenly realize that "the structure of appearance erected to impress Daisy is founded on some

kind of illegal traffic" (Hanzo 188), and they further recognize that "[Daisy] is lost to Gatsby

even before the accident of Myrtle's death" (188). Nick utilizes his position as the survivor of

Gatsby's life to artistically depict his doomed dream, and in doing so he and the reader both may

sympathize with a man killed by his unattainable desire.

Nick Carraway as an Others-Oriented Narrator

Fitzgerald seems to have taken after Melville when he crafted a narrator so passive that

he serves to highlight the lives of others, only haunting the background of another's story. In

fact, Nick is so quiet and unobtrusive that he often apologizes for his presence; upon first

meeting Jordan, he was "almost surprised into murmuring an apology for having disturbed her

by coming in" (Fitzgerald 24). The emptiness of his presence is something that the characters

around Nick also take note of. When Nick attempts to leave Daisy and Gatsby alone, they oddly

insist that he stay. Nick internally remarks that "perhaps my presence made them feel more

satisfactorily alone" (88). In his passive and inactive nature, Nick is often subject to the whim

and will of the characters around him and does little to push back against the rushing tide of their desires. During his outing with Tom and Myrtle, Nick tried to get away but becomes "entangled in some wild strident argument which pulled [him] back, as if with ropes" (44). Nick's lack of agency and his contentment in remaining quietly in the background provides the perfect lens through which to focus on the lives of the characters around him, and especially the fatally-flawed protagonist.

In his reluctance to forge his own path, Nick becomes extremely invested in the affairs of those around him. The readers spend little time with Nick alone; they are given a short amount of time in the story's opening to become acquainted with the narrator before Nick quickly becomes engrossed in the affairs of other characters. It is only a few short pages after the book's inception that Nick is in Daisy and Tom's home, caught up in their marital issues, and already aware of the mysterious Gatsby. Nick is "an outsider who is nonetheless drawn to the life he is afraid to enter" (Samuels 785), and once he enters it, he becomes so engrossed with the lives of others that he nearly forgets to live himself. For example, what little personal involvement Nick has in the storyline is second to his investment in the lives of others, specifically Gatsby. Throughout the story, he is only halfheartedly involved in his love affair with Jordan Baker (785), the only storyline that is truly his, because he is so consumed by his concern for Gatsby. Samuels reminds readers that "when Jordan calls Nick after Myrtle's death, he refuses to see her because he is more interested in Gatsby than in the woman he thinks he might love" (791). Nick possesses an intense focus on others that leads to the neglect of his personal life; his intense orientation on others promotes empathy throughout the narrative, even if it is at the expense of self.

Nick's deep investment in the lives of others allows readers to fully immerse themselves in Nick's world and connect deeply to Gatsby and his plight. Nick is extremely attuned to the

inner lives of those around him, often picking up on the emotional nuances that only a single glance might communicate. At Gatsby's party, Nick literally begins to look at the night's events "through Daisy's eyes" (Fitzgerald 96), and he recognizes that Daisy "saw something awful in the very simplicity she failed to understand" (98). In perhaps his greatest extension of imaginative sympathy, Nick depicts the emotional turmoil of Wilson after his wife's death – the man who would soon be Gatsby's killer. He takes on the third-person perspective to depict a conversation between Wilson and Michaelis, and, though Nick did not witness the scene, he describes in detail Wilson's uncontrollable sobs and his refusal to enter the garage because "the work bench was stained where the body had been lying" (136). Perhaps unconsciously inserting his own pleas through the voice of Michaelis, he insists that Wilson should "sit quiet till morning" (137). Nick's knowledge of the inevitable, looming fate of both Wilson and Gatsby, allows him to look on the world with remorse, and even understanding. Palladino observes the shift from first-person to third-person as Nick sinks deeper into the psyche of those around him:

> The oscillation between first- and third-person narration provides the reader with a wider lens and an all-encompassing view not typically available in novels. Readers have the benefit of an insider's knowledge of what is taking place, combined with the objectivity and truth that can only come from an observer who remains just removed from the action … they orient us and provide perspective. (29)

A narrator so attuned to the emotional depth of the characters around him, demonstrating that understanding through stylistic choices throughout the narrative, allows the reader to partake in a deeper understanding of the characters and their internal complexity.

Empathy and Sympathy for the Fatally-Flawed Protagonist

Once readers are established in their connection with Nick based on familiarity of experience, his normalcy, his focus on others, and his status as survivor, readers can extend sympathy toward the fatally-flawed protagonist, hurtling toward his fated end. Nick's honesty is constantly at war with his desire to think well of Gatsby; Samuels claims that "the act of writing the book is an act of judgment … Nick wants to know why Gatsby 'turned out all right in the end,' despite all the phoniness and crime which fill his story" (787). Gatsby so badly wants to think well of his friend; during the fight at the Plaza Hotel, Gatsby confirms that he did in fact go to Oxford, and Nick "wanted to get up and slap him on the back. [He] had one of those renewals of complete faith in him that [he'd] often experienced before" (Fitzgerald 115). It is this representation of Nick's, often senseless, support of Gatsby that sheds new light on Gatsby through the perspective of a friend, however reluctant. The writing of *The Great Gatsby* itself if Nick's act of seeking out sympathy for his deceased friend whose life was so clouded with corruption, and whose desolate funeral reveals just how little he was loved in life.

Only in his status as friend and survivor can Nick view Gatsby and his life with empathy and encourage the same emotionally complex response from the readers. At the end of Chapter 6, Gatsby admits that, although he has been reunited with Daisy, he feels "far away from her" (Fitzgerald 100). He confesses his consuming desire to make present the emotions, the love, that existed for Gatsby only in the past. When Nick sagely tells Gatsby that he cannot repeat the past, Gatsby exclaims, "Why of course you can!" (100). He then "looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand" (100). There are heavy empathic implications in this small passage. These words are being written by a man who has just experienced the death of his friend, and who is actively attempting to recreate the past

through his retelling of Gatsby's story. Nick both recognizes and shares Gatsby's desire to return

to the past, knowing the truth that "if he could once return to a certain starting place and go over

it all slowly" (101), the isolation and loss he experienced could be reversed. Nick acknowledges

the fruitless endeavor of recreating the past, of experiencing again his friendship with Gatsby

through mimesis, but he attempts it anyway, and the result is a beautiful portrait of retrospective

empathy. Because Nick takes on a perspective full of empathy for Gatsby, the readers are

exposed to Gatsby in a different light. Instead of seeing an adulterer and a liar, the readers

perceive a forlorn lover who is pining after a dream long dead.

Another example of Nick's empathy and the reader's sympathy for Gatsby is the

reoccurring theme of loneliness found both in *Moby Dick* and *The Great Gatsby.* Nick so

accurately depicts the loneliness and isolation of Gatsby's dream because he suffers from the

same loneliness. The loneliness of Gatsby's existence permeates the tone of the narrative; Nick

describes the way Gatsby watches for the distant green light emanating from Daisy's home

across the bay. The first time the readers see Gatsby, he is gazing toward that same light.

Surrounded by darkness and shadow, he "stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a

curious way, and … he was trembling" (Fitzgerald 33). Nearly every description of Gatsby can

be connected to his isolation. At his own party, Nick notices that Gatsby stands alone, surveying

his guests rather than participating in the life before him. Nick notes that "no one swooned

backward on Gatsby and no French bob touched Gatsby's shoulder and no singing quartets were

formed with Gatsby's head for one link" (55), and although Nick notes that Gatsby is "correct"

in his separation from the wild crowd, there is the underlying acknowledgement that Gatsby has

made himself truly "alone" by adopting a lifestyle in which he never belonged, for the sake of a

girl who will not love him. Nick echoes this same lonely sentimentality when he, in a new and

unfamiliar city, he fantasizes about entering the lives of unfamiliar women, noting that "no one

would know or disapprove" (60). After Nick realizes he has forgotten his own birthday, he

reflects on "thirty—the promise of a decade of loneliness" (120). Nick confirms both his

loneliness and his tendency to take on the emotions of others in a single sentence, when he

admits that he "felt a haunting loneliness sometimes, and felt it in others" (60), and he felt it

deeply in Gatsby and his dream. Further, the loneliness of being Gatsby's survivor draws Nick

closer to the truth of Gatsby's own loneliness. As Gatsby's acquaintances turn against him and

abandon him in death, Nick finds himself "on Gatsby's side, and *alone*" (141). Samuels perfectly

articulates the connection between Nick and Gatsby when he says, "As the book nears

completion [Nick's] identification with Gatsby grows. His final affirmation is his sympathetic

understanding of Gatsby and the book which gives his sympathy form: both are a celebration of

life; each is a gift of language" (785). Because Nick and Gatsby are so closely emotionally

linked, the reader feels for Gatsby, while Nick feels with his lost friend as he drifts in the same

loneliness that consumed Gatsby's life.

Conclusion

Both Ishmael and Nick Carraway serve as illustrations of secondary characters with a

myriad of functions: they are survivors, outsiders, observers, and friends. Because of their status

and placement in the narrative, they possess the unique ability to extend empathy toward the

fatally-flawed protagonist. The readers, established in their familiarity with the secondary

character and drawn ever closer to the work of fiction through mimesis, can empathize with the

narrator, and sympathize with the protagonist. Literature provides humanity with the unique

opportunity to imaginatively care for those around them and to extend their compassion toward

those who may not deserve it. If seriously and passionately pursued, this complex but rewarding

emotional experience could reshape readers' minds and hearts to recognize the needs of others

and instinctively seek the good in people, regardless of their flaws.

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