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Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters’ thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

The Great Gatsby is told in the first person by Nick Carraway. The novel begins from the point of view of an older Nick, reminiscing on the events of one summer. Nick’s perspective, entangled in the dramatic action, subjectively depicts a series of events.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to list the things they’ve learned about Nick Carraway in the first two chapters of the novel. How might his background color the way he tells this story? How trustworthy is Nick?

How might the perspective of Chapter 1 change if F. Scott Fitzgerald had chosen to narrate the story in the first person from Daisy’s “sophisticated” point of view? Have the class brainstorm the outline of this new chapter.

Writing Exercise

Based on the previous activity, write a few pages of Daisy’s version of the story.

Chapter 2 begins with the “valley of ashes” and the “eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg.” What do they reveal about Nick’s character and point of view? What do they reveal about the landscape?

Homework

Read Chapter 3 (pp. 39–59). What do we learn about Gatsby from Nick’s observations before we meet him?