Critical Essay

Choose a novel in which the method of narration makes a major contribution to its impact.

Describe the method of narration and explain why you feel it made a significant contribution to your appreciation of the text as a whole.

Introduction

“The Great Gatsby” by F. Scott Fitzgerald is told in first person narrative by a character called Nick Caraway. The method of narration was very powerful and helps me appreciate the themes and ideas of the text more effectively. Nick meets and becomes friends with the main character of the novel, Jay Gatsby, who is rich and enigmatic. Gatsby has one real ambition in life – to win back the girl of his dreams, Daisy Buchanan. He is determined to climb to the top of the social ladder. He achieves this but his money was earned illegally and he was never accepted by the social elite represented by Daisy and her husband Tom.

Pear 1

Point

The first reason that the narrative style is effective is it allows us to see Gatsby as a mysterious character, but also allows us to get to know him well because of Nick’s unique friendship with him.

Evidence

At the start of the novel, Nick is unfamiliar with his neighbour, but the reader is aware that he is a much discussed character. At his first social engagement in the East, Jordan Baker, a friend of Daisy’s is incredulous:

“You must know Gatsby.”

Analysis

The tone of this statement makes it clear that Gatsby is obviously a well discussed character because Jordan automatically assumes that Nick will have heard of him. Furthermore, Nick hears a number of rumours about Gatsby before he meets him, all of them sinister and intriguing, for example that Gatsby once “killed a man”. Both of these rumours suggest a danger and a mystery to the reader.

Response

The method of narration does not allow the reader to know any more than our narrator, and this increases our suspense and anticipation about Gatsby in a way that third person narrative ever could.

Pear 2

Point

Furthermore, symbolism is used to enhance the narrative style.

Evidence

Nick sees him standing alone in the darkness reaching out to a green light across the water of the sound on fashionable East Egg:

“He stretched out his arms towards the dark water in a curious way and I could have sworn he was trembling”

Analysis

The method of narration does not allow Nick or the reader to know the green light’s origin at this point, nor what it represents to Gatsby, but the word choice, “trembling” and the description of his posture makes it clear that Gatsby has some intense inner yearning. It is not until later that we realise that the light is in fact Daisy’s dock light. It is powerful symbol of Gatsby’s obsession.

Response

This is significant to me at this point because Nick’s narration makes it clear from the outset that Gatsby’s goal will be unattainable.

Pear 3

Point

As the narrator’s relationship develops with Gatsby, our knowledge of him gradually increases as through Nick’s narration that we finally understands exactly why Gatsby feels as strongly as he does about Daisy.

Evidence

Before a key incident he articulates this for the reader:

“(her voice ) was full of money – that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the golden girl…”

Analysis

The onomatopoeia used here again emphasises to the reader that Gatsby’s obsession is not merely romantic but sees the acquisition of Daisy as the fulfilment of all his ambitions – she has wealth and status which Gatsby longs for.

Response

Nick’s narration is crucial here as without it we would not fully grasp the point of Gatsby’s desires for Daisy.

Pear 4

Point
Nick is also present during the turning point at the Plaza Hotel.

Evidence
Through his narrative we understand the tension between Gatsby and Daisy better especially when it seems that Daisy does not live up to the dreams Gatsby has for them. She says,

‘I did not him once but I loved you too” Gatsby’s eyes opened and closed.

Analysis
This dialogue clearly points out to the reader that Gatsby had not anticipated that Daisy could possibly love another man. His disbelief is highlighted though Nick’s observation as clearly it takes him a moment to comprehend what she has said.

Response

Here the narrative method is effective because Nick sees the flaws in Gatsby’s dream before he does. He is so blinded by his dream he cannot understand or see how wrong his actions are.

Pear 5

Point

Nick’s narrative is important too for showing the flaws in Daisy’s character.

Evidence

At the climax of the novel, after Daisy has carelessly killed Myrtle with her car leaving Gatsby to take the blame and he has been killed for it by Myrtle’s husband Nick notes:

“They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed things up”

Analysis

This emphasis how fickle Daisy is – she does not know what she wants out of life and is willing to toy with the feelings of others for her own amusement. She needs the financial security Tom offers and abandons Gatsby when she learns his true identity.

Response

At this stage in the novel Nick as the narrator is clearly deeply disappointed since he truly cared for Gatsby. His narration shows that he understands Gatsby and thinks his dream gave his life meaning unlike Daisy who is purposeless.

Conclusion

And so it is clear that though the very powerful method of narration used by Fitzgerald helps the reader to appreciate the themes and ideas of the text more effectively because by the end of the novel we understand through Nick’s narration how selfish characters like Daisy and Tom are and can admire Gatsby for following a dream.