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### Nick Carraway in the Queer '20s

The 1920s, also known as the Jazz Age, was known for its vast cultural shift from the earlier decades. A new genre of music called jazz is making its debut at this time, making many of the more conservative people upset with its new style and upbeat tempo. The flapper movement also took effect in the 1920s. This was a superficial women's movement where dress and behavior codes were challenged; women took part in smoking and drinking, which were primarily men's activities. A new, underground queer culture is also emerging during this time, and is making an impression. *The Great Gatsby*, a novel of the modern era by F. Scott Fitzgerald is often said by many to capture the culture, essence, and ambiance of the Jazz Age with its vivid imagery and plethora of detail while criticizing it. A complex group of characters which are portrayed either as immoral and negative, or ambiguous in whether we should feel sympathy for them or not set the stage for this. Each one adding to *The Great Gatsby*'s critique of the era. Nick Carraway, who has implied sexual relations with a man coded as queer, and has a disinterest in women, contributes to *The Great Gatsby*'s capturing and critique of the Jazz Age.

It is entirely possible to read Nick Carraway as a queer character. A prominent scene that proves his queerness is after Tom strikes Myrtle and breaks her nose and Nick leaves with Mr. McKee.

“Come to lunch some day,” [Mr. McKee] suggested as we groaned down in the elevator.

“Where?”

“Anywhere.”

“Keep your hands off the lever,” snapped the elevator boy.

“I beg your pardon,” said Mr. McKee with dignity. “I didn’t know I was touching it.”

“All right,” I agreed, “I’ll be glad to.”

... I was standing beside his bed and he was sitting up between the sheets, clad in his underwear, with a great portfolio in his hands. (Fitzgerald 42)

This starts out as Mr. McKee asking Nick to go out for a fling. While they are negotiating, Mr. McKee grips the elevator lever, which serves as a metaphor for the male genitals—a phallic symbol. After Nick sees this, he immediately agrees to go out with McKee, and minutes later, Nick is looking at a naked Mr. McKee in his bed. This implies that the two engaged in sexual relations with each other. This serves no purpose towards the plot of *The Great Gatsby*. It is simply the character development of Nick Carraway. Monty Heying agrees in his paper *Gay Implications in the Great Gatsby’s Nick Carraway* arguing that it works as “background color” (Heying). It assists this point that Mr. McKee and Nick engaged in sexual relations in part because Mr. McKee is coded as queer. He is described as a “pale feminine man” in the “artistic game” (Fitzgerald 34). Lois Tyson, author of *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, says to look out for stereotypical and heterosexist traits when looking for queer codes (325). Both being artistic and the effeminate male are traits that code Mr. McKee as queer. Nick, later

in the chapter, takes on a nurturing personality as he wipes shaving cream off of Mr. McKee's face. The nurturing trait is linked to femininity, thus coding Nick as queer as well.

Nick is disinterested in women as well. For example, the scene where Nick is on the train on a very hot day and the woman next to him drops her pocket book on the floor:

I picked it up with a weary bend and handed it back to her holding it at arm's length and by the extreme tip of the corners to indicate that I had no designs upon it—but everyone nearby, including the woman next to me, suspected me just the same.

... My commutation ticket came back to me with a dark stain from [the conductor's] hand. That anyone should care whose flushed lips he kissed, whose head made damp the pajama pocket over his heart! (Fitzgerald 121)

The woman's pocket book, in this case, represents femininity. Nick seemingly has no interest in the pocket-book, picking it up by the very corner indicating that he has no interest in the woman who dropped it, romantic or otherwise. Later in the scene, Nick says in his narration that he does not care if the conductor kisses somebody on the train, including himself. The train conductor kissing Nick is a fantasy with the hot day representing the heated moment. Francisco Yeray Estévez Cabrera agrees in his end of degree paper for the University *de La Laguna*, arguing that the woman's pocket book is a metaphorical symbol representing female genitalia and that Nick fantasizes about the conductor kissing him. Backtracking to the aforementioned point in the previous paragraph, this scene has little to do with the plot development of *The Great Gatsby*; it is about Nick Carraway as a character adding imagery to the novel.

Nick Carraway's sexual identity begs the question: what does all this mean? For many who read *The Great Gatsby*, they say it captures the essence of the 1920s. Jazz music, flappers, extraordinary parties, and drinking when it is prohibited are all things that are reflective of this era, which can be found in the novel. During the 1920s, there was a huge upswing in underground queer culture. Much of this expansion took place in bohemian neighborhoods New York's Harlem and Greenwich Village. It might not be coincidental that *The Great Gatsby* takes place in the New York metropolitan area, close to where this underground culture was emerging. In Harlem, according to Eric Garber, author of "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem," parties in Harlem were safe(r) places for queer men and women to get together. Many queer writers and artists such as Richard Bruce Nugent were making their debuts in these neighborhoods during this time (Garber). Nick's queer tendencies are perhaps *The Great Gatsby* capturing the essence of the Jazz Age and its emerging queer underground culture.

If *The Great Gatsby* is providing a critique of the roaring '20s while capturing its essence, then perhaps it is portraying Nick Carraway as queer to add to that criticism. Many of the characters in *The Great Gatsby* are morally corrupt. Gatsby is narcissistic and does anything to win back his former lover, Daisy. Tom is a cheating husband who batters his mistress. Daisy hides behind her privilege to avoid taking any responsibility such as hitting Myrtle with Gatsby's car while letting him take the blame. Nick Carraway and his sexuality can be interpreted as morally deviant by the people of the time. During the twentieth century, sexuality that was not heterosexual in nature was seen as deviant, and it still is today. Perhaps *The Great Gatsby*

is offering a critique of the new culture that is emerging beneath the feet of the main characters in the novel and Fitzgerald himself.

If *The Great Gatsby* does capture the essence of the '20s, then it is clear as to why Nick Carraway is portrayed as queer. He is simply an addition to the imagery, giving readers a taste other than the ubiquitous heterosexual narrative. *The Great Gatsby* is capturing the underground queer scene in the same way it captures the parties, the jazz, and everything else about the Jazz Age while also critiquing the and its loose morals it had compared to the Victorian era.

## Works Cited

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