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Character and Ambivalent Identification
A Reading of *The Great Gatsby*

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Introduction

For much of the twentieth century, the concept of character occupied a contested position within academic literary criticism, in fact, under the dominant currents of Russian Formalism, Anglo-American New Criticism, and French Structuralism, the study of literary figures was treated with profound methodological skepticism. Formalists and structuralists from Roman Jakobson and John Crowe Ransom to Cleanth Brooks, L. C. Knights, and Roland Barthes insisted that a literary work is an autonomous verbal artifact whose meaning resides strictly in its internal linguistic and formal organization. Within this text-centered paradigm, characters were systematically stripped of psychological interiority, consciousness, and moral agency and reduced instead to structural functions, within a narrative weave. To discuss the emotional and empathetic bonds that readers form with characters was condemned as a naive error and a critical taboo that persisted across decades of scholarly discourse.

In recent decades, however, this formalist taboo has been challenged by a powerful resurgence of interest in character and readerly reception. Guided by feminist theorists, cognitive literary scholars and postcritical philosophers such as Toril Moi, Blakey Vermeule, Lisa Zunshine, James Seaton, and preeminently Rita Felski, contemporary literary studies begun to rehabilitate character as an indispensable category of literary experience. This critical renewal does not represent a regressive retreat into unreflective realism, but rather, it recognizes that reading is fundamentally an affective and relational practice. As cognitive scientists and literary theorists have demonstrated, human beings possess an evolved psychological architecture that is naturally attuned to navigating social relationships and caring about other minds (Vermeule 29; Zunshine 10), and fiction ahppens to directly mobilizes these deeply ingrained social instincts, transforming reading into a dynamic space of cognitive exploration, emotional investment, and existential resonance.

Central to this contemporary rehabilitation is the theoretical re-evaluation of readerly identification. Long dismissed by anti-humanist critics as a simplistic mechanism, identification has recently been re-conceptualized as a multifaceted mode of textual engagement; in her foundational works *Uses of Literature* (2008) and *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (2020), Rita Felski persuasively demonstrates that attachment to artworks is not an impediment to critical thinking, but rather the very condition that makes literary meaning possible (Felski, *Hooked* 14). To capture the nuance of this process Felski

decides to deconstruct identification into four distinct modalities, which are those of alignment, allegiance, recognition, and empathy. By doing so, contemporary theory allows us to formulate the core concept of this dissertation: complex identification.

The concept of complex identification arises precisely when these different modalities of attachment do not neatly align, but instead they pull the reader in uncomfortable directions. Unlike traditional or conventional narratives that encourage seamless moral sympathy with a virtuous hero, modernist and post-modernist fiction frequently solicits attachment through figures who are ethically compromised, profoundly divided, or socially marginalized, and in such texts readers are positioned in states of acute interpretive ambivalence: we may experience intimate cognitive alignment with a narrator whose judgments we cannot fully trust, feel profound empathetic resonance with a protagonist whose actions we ethically condemn, or recognize our own repressed desires and hypocrisies mirrored in characters who refuse conventional moral redemption.

The central thesis of this dissertation is that F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby*, stands as a magnum opus of complex identification in modern American literature. Far from offering straightforward archetypes of virtue or villainy, Fitzgerald constructs an intricate architecture of ambivalence in which every primary figure, Jay Gatsby, Daisy Buchanan, Nick Carraway, and Myrtle Wilson, resists reductive moral categorization and challenges the reader's affective allegiances.

To demonstrate the validity and critical power of this theoretical framework, this thesis is structured into three interconnected chapters. Chapter One, "The Debate on Character", provides a historical overview of the controversy surrounding character in twentieth and twentyfirst century literary theory: it contrasts the anti-humanist currents of Formalism, New Criticism, and Structuralism with the humanist, cognitive, and affective perspectives that have successfully reclaimed the validity of readerly engagement. Chapter Two, "Complex Identification and Moral Ambiguity: A Case Study of Myrtle Wilson", articulates the theoretical mechanics of complex identification through Felski's lenses and performs an in-depth textual analysis of Myrtle Wilson, showing how her intense physicality and tragic striving solicit ambivalent solidarity across class boundaries. Finally, in Chapter Three "Nick Carraway, Jay Gatsby, and the Lived Experience of Complex Identification", we'll be able to see that in F. Scott Fitzgerald's masterpiece the dynamic of complex identification is not only an external event, but it also happens directly inside the text itself., in fact the narrator and central protagonist of the novel, Nick Carraway, lives a dramatic and transformative case of complex identification

on his own skin, with the enigmatic figure of Jay Gatsby. Through this methodological progression, this dissertation establishes that complex identification is not merely a descriptive tool, but an essential hermeneutic lens for understanding the enduring ethical and emotional power of literary modernism.

Character and Ambivalent Identification

A Reading of *The Great Gatsby*

Chapter One
The Debate on Character

In the last decades, the methodological discussion of character in literary studies has been subjected to a profound critical reassessment, in fact, for a long time the category of character received relatively little attention in narratology. Gérard Genette, for example, responds to criticism for not fully accounting for character in *Narrative Discourse* (1980) by stating that: "My study bears on narrative discourse and not its objects." (Genette 22). Genette thus limits narratology's concern with character to characterization, defined as "the technique of constituting characters with narrative texts". Genette's point is that narratology is about the form of the story, not the people in it, therefore characters are only interesting as effects of the text, and what narratology should study is only how they're made, not who they are.

More recent critical work, however, has challenged these perspectives and argued that characters are central to understanding how novels function, how they generate ethical response, and how readers engage with them. As an example, one of the works that I find particularly interesting for advancing the discussion on literary character and the ways in which it can influence the reader is that of Felski, Anderson, and Moi. In their book *Character*, through three separate essays, each author challenges certain taboos surrounding the literary character and proposes different ways of reinterpreting it. From my perspective, this shift means that thanks to the developments in character study, scholars today no longer see characters as mere accessories to plot or structure, but instead, they recognize that characters are essential to the novel's very operation: they shape the story's meaning, guide the reader's emotional and moral involvement, and make readers feel the story as real. In the words of John Frow:

> Character in this sense is a resource for moral analysis and is closely tied to literary pedagogies in which the analysis of ethical issues and dilemmas relating to literary figures [...] forms the basis of an institutionalized practice for constructing moral selves or good personal character. The moral selves of fictional characters reflect and help shape our own. (Frow, 16)

Without characters, the novel would lose much of its power to move us. For this reason, our question to this day is no longer simply whether characters are "real" or not, but what characters do within literary culture and what kind of relation they establish with readers. This is the reason why more recent scholarship tends to understand literary figures as textual constructions, but also as sites of emotional investment, moral judgment, identity, and identification.

The critical debate on character is crucial because it connects literary theory with narratology, cognitive approaches to reading, ethics, and the psychology of response; the debate has been growing and approaching many different thematics during the decades, and today, in contemporary criticism, there are mainly two large and opposing currents that have been especially influential: the humanist and the anti-humanist movements. The terms humanist and antihumanist are used by Toril Moi in her essay Rethinking Character (Moi 28-68) to name the two critical positions she wants to distinguish: one that treats character, emotion, moral response, and thematic meaning as legitimate objects of literary criticism, and another that treats those concerns as naive, sentimental, or theoretically outdated. She uses the opposition to show that the rejection of character analysis was not a neutral philosophical fact, but a product of modernist-formalist criticism, which privileged impersonality, form, and professional rigor.

The humanist current emphasizes the moral agency of characters and the various ways in which they may affect readers. Its most representative scholars are James Seaton, a contemporary humanist critic, who defends literary humanism, and Rita Felski, the leading contemporary scholar on character identification and empathy. I will discuss both scholars and their theories and build on their concepts. On the other hand, the anti-humanist current insists that characters are nothing more than textual constructs, or even mere assemblages of text, whose significance depends entirely on their position within narrative structure. To sustain this thesis and these ideas I will cite some relevant scholars such as Roman Jakobson, a Russian formalist who founded formalism's focus on "literariness"; Roland Barthes, who argued that characters are only functions and positions in the narrative structure, and L.C. Knights, a British New Critic who wrote the famous essay "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?", where he challenges character-based reading methods.

Both perspectives are important, and the aim of this chapter is not to dismiss one in favor of the other, but rather to show that the debate becomes most productive when we understand what each side contributes to. I agree with the humanist position on the fact

that characters can influence readers, invite identification, and generate emotional as well as ethical participation, but I also recognize the limits of this view, and these limits become especially visible when one adopts a formalist perspective, according to which characters must be studied as elements of textual structure rather than as real psychological entities.

1.1 The Anti-Humanist Currents: Formalism

Two relevant and opposite lines of thought are to be found in the humanist and the formalist currents with all of their subsequent branches and developments. More specifically, the first one focuses on the moral agency of a character and the way it can impact its readers in a lot of different ways. The anti-humanists, on the other hand, sustain that characters are assemblages of text and they only have power in relation to the structure. Both of these points of view are important for us to have a better understanding of the debate on character today, and to deepen the discussion it is necessary to trace briefly the history of these two critical orientations, beginning with the anti-humanist side.

One of the main branches of anti-humanist thought is formalism, a movement that plays a fundamental role in the debate on character. As stated by the Merriam-Webster dictionary of American language, formalism is: "a marked attention to arrangement, style, or artistic means (as in art or literature) usually with corresponding de-emphasis of content." This definition encapsulates perfectly the true meaning of the formalist doctrine and its focus on form and style, in fact, what matters from this perspective is the text itself and the internal organization that gives it shape. Formalist criticism therefore rejects external interpretive frameworks and insists on the autonomy of the literary work: this means that a work should be understood and judged on its own terms and through its internal features rather than through outside factors like the author's life, the historical context, politics, or moral meaning. In the words of Roman Jakobson, one of the main figures behind the doctrine of formalism: "The object of study in literary science is not literature, but literariness, that is to say, what makes a given work a literary work." (Jackobson 350)

In other words, the formalist theory argues that critics should focus on the formal characteristics of a text, such as its language, structure, and literary devices, because these are the elements that make it literary. This emphasis on linguistics is crucial for understanding the formalist conception of character. Roland Barthes argues tha:

> As everyone knows, linguistics stops at the sentence; it is the last unit that falls within its scope; for if the sentence-being an order and not a sequence-is not reducible to the sum of its words, and constitutes therefore an original unit, an enunciation, on the other hand, is nothing but the succession of the sentences it contains. From the point of view of linguistics, there is nothing in discourse that is not matched in the sentence. […] It follows that linguistics cannot conceivably adopt for its object anything superior to the sentence, because beyond the sentence, all there can ever be is more sentences: having described the flower, the botanist cannot concern himsell with describing the "bouquet". (Barthes 239-240)

This means then, that every element within a text, including character, must be interpreted in relation to the work's internal structure. A character is therefore not a real person, nor a psychological subject that exists independently of the text, but an entity constituted entirely through language and narrative arrangement. In this sense, character becomes a purely textual phenomenon: an assemblage of words, gestures, descriptions, and relations that acquire meaning only within the structure of the work. To look for meaning outside the text would signify to weaken the autonomy of the literary object and to risk importing interpretive assumptions that the text itself does not support. In fact, what matters for our discussion on character is that formalism takes no account of any external links and relies exclusively on the text: therefore, to search for meanings outside the text, would risk distorting the autonomy of the literary work itself. The formalist tradition, sustains that this strict focus on the text allows us to a more precise and rigorous analysis. In fact, it permits us to avoid interpretations that are too subjective or influenced by external knowledge that is not directly supported by the text itself. For example, when analysing a character in a novel, a formalist approach would not ask what the author intended to say about that character, nor how the character reflects any real social conditions. Instead, it would focus on how the character functions within the narrative: how it is described, how it interacts with other elements, and what role it plays in the overall structure of the work.

In this way, our character becomes something that exists only within the boundaries of language, without any necessary references to the external world, and also with no power or influence outside of the text itself. In addition, this school of thought holds a very interesting history; formalism in fact plants its roots in Russian Formalism, a school of literary theory that was born in Russia in the 1910s. In the words of Carol J. Ani, an American scholar of Russian literature and literary theory:

> Russian literary Formalism was a movement in literary criticism active from about 1915 to 1929 that viewed the literary work as a self-referential, constructed artifact rather than as an expression of reality outside the text. It focused on the question of how a work is made rather than what it says. Formalists argued that literary language differs from ordinary language and investigated the qualities they called "literariness", the features that make a work artistic. They therefore regarded literature as an autonomous form of human activity governed by its own internal principles. (Ani, Introduction)

This statement stands at the very base of the school of thought of Russian Formalism, and it explains that art, and in our specific case literature, is completely autonomous of any external influence, hence a character is nothing but a part of the structure. This is why the character, in a formalist framework, is not a real person but a functional element of a text. It is also why a concept such as that of identification becomes problematic from this perspective: if the character is only a linguistic construction, then emotional or empathetic attachment seems theoretically secondary, or even misleading. Thus, formalism, which comes from Russian Formalism, is essential for us to mention because it explains that character is only a formal element. But this theoretical framework chapter would not be complete without reporting other very interesting currents of thought that evolved from formalism. Worth mentioning in fact, are the movements of American New Criticism and Structuralism. Both of these theoretical approaches are helpful for us to understand where the anti-humanists stand in relation to the debate on character.

1.1.2 New Criticism

New Criticism is relevant to this analysis as it developed directly from formalism, and within this tradition it occupies a particularly important place. This is because this school of thought also treats the literary work as autonomous and aesthetic rather than as a reflection of biography, history, or human experience, and for my research on character analysis in literature and especially on *The Great Gatsby*, this is quite relevant because it moves the attention away from what Fitzgerald maybe intended or from the historical context of the Jazz Age, and instead it asks us to look carefully at how the text itself creates meaning through its own elements.

New Criticism is a term that was coined by John Crowe Ransom, an American poet and critic who became the main theorist of this movement. He states that: "criticism

must become more scientific, or precise and systematic, and this means that it must be developed by the collective and sustained effort of learned persons." (Ransom 586). Ransom argues that literary criticism has to become more scientific and accurate by shifting its emphasis from historical scholarship and moral judgment toward the aesthetic appreciation of the work itself. He insists that the critic must study literature, not something about literature, and this is what makes his approach so radical and also so useful for character analysis. When we study a character like Jay Gatsby, New Criticism tells us not to look at Fitzgerald's biography or at the historical background, but instead to examine how the character is constructed through the language, imagery and structure of the text. Ransom believes that the poem, or any literary work, is to be seen as an autonomous metaphysical entity that cannot be reduced to prose or to abstract ideas. He wants criticism to exclude personal impressions because the critic should describe the nature of the object itself, and not its effects on the reader. Historical studies like biography, literary sources and background are then excluded, and even moral content becomes of limited importance to the text; to Ransom, what really matters is the aesthetic unity of the work and how all the parts work together.

To achieve this unity, the main method and the most important theory of New Criticism is the close reading is a method of intensive textual analysis that aims to concentrate exclusively on the language and formal structure of a work, without referencing any additional external context. It requires annotating the text, identifying repeated images or motifs, paying attention to changes in tone, and examining the author's specific word choice with great care. To have a clearer explanation of what a close reading is and what it really allows us to do when analyzing a text, we could state that a close reading is a way of studying a text very carefully and attentively: this translates to the fact that a reader should not look at the author's life, history, or outside information but instead focus only on the words inside the text, by reading the text closely and paying attention to small details, such as repeated words, images, or ideas.

The aim of a close reading is to understand how the text works and produces meaning through its language and structure and its main goal is in fact to find an organic unity in the text, where all parts of the work are interconnected and contribute to the overall effect. Cleanth Brooks, an American literary critic and one of the key figures associated with New Criticism, sustains in his masterful work *The Well Wrought Urn*, published in 1947 that:

> The relation between all the elements must surely be an organic one - there can be no question about that. The structure of the poem is not a structure of logic, but a structure of attitudes and reactions. The poem succeeds or fails according to the kind of unity it achieves. The unity is not a unity of the sort to be achieved by the reduction and simplification appropriate to an algebraic formula, but a unity of the complex, the ambiguous, the paradoxical. (Brooks 176)

Brooks means that a poem should be read as a unified whole in which every element works together organically rather than separately. He is rejecting the idea that poetry, or literature in a more general sense, can be reduced to a simple logical statement or summarized by a single abstract meaning, in fact he sustains the idea that its true value lies in the way it holds together complexity, ambiguity, and paradox without resolving them into something overly neat or simplified. In other words, Brooks argues that poetry is a living structure whose parts create meaning through their relationship to the whole.

With this beign said, it seems clear that the doctrine of New Criticism becomes fundamental for us to mention in regard to the debate on character when we consider that in New Criticism character is not studied as a psychological or biographical entity but as a formal element that contributes to the organic unity of the text, all of the evidence in fact must come exclusively from the language of the text itself: dialogue, actions, descriptions, metaphors, and symbols that are related to the character must all come from the text rather than from external sources. This current of thought fully supports the idea that characters, like all other elements, function inside a unified textual structure and their purpose is to serve the thematic and the structural unity of the work, with every speech, action, or trait connecting to and supporting the work's central paradox, irony, or theme. New Critics reject asking questions like "Why did the author create this character?" or "What does this character say about the author's life?", but instead a character is understood as a verbal construct whose meaning exists only in how it contributes to the text's self contained aesthetic unity. To be clear, New Criticism and Formalism certainly resemble each other, and New Criticism is an Anglo-American variant inspired by Formalism, but there is a small yet substantial difference between the two doctrines: the main concern of formalism is the *how* of literature, especially the mechanics that make a text "literary" in the first place; while New Criticism is more centered on interpretive close reading and on discovering the organic unity of the text.

For example, when analyzing *The Great Gatsby*, a method to read the character of Jay Gatsby in a way that suits the criteria of New Criticism would be to analyze how his

dialogue, his actions and symbols associated to his figure such as the green light, his parties or his wealth, function textually to create tension between illusion and reality that contributes to the novel's organic unity. As Cleanth Brooks explains then, the relation between all elements, including character, must be organic, with every part of the character interconnecting with imagery, metaphors, symbols, and plot to create a unified whole where meaning emerges from the text's internal structure. This is why New Criticism is anti-humanist in its stance, because it removes the human author and the human reader from the center of the interpretation and puts the text itself at the center of the conversation.

One important name among the New Critics is certainly that of L. C. Knights, who is more specifically a part of the British New Criticism movement. However, he shares with the American New Critics the text-centric approach, which is what is useful for us in the light of the debate on character. The English Shakespeare critic, with his masterful essay published in 1993, *How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?* set out to challenge character-based readings of Shakespeare and helped reshape modern criticism. In fact, in his essay L. C. Knights argued that Shakespeare should not be read as if the characters were real people to be analyzed psychologically outside the text. His main target was precisely this kind of character-based criticism, which was very common in the Victorian and Edwardian tradition. This is why the central idea that Knights suggests in his text is that of shifting the attention from the character as a living individual to the character as a function of the drama, that is, as an element shaped by language, structure, conflict, and theatrical form. As L.C Knights states in his essay:

> In the mass of Shakespeare criticism there is not a hint that "character" - like "plot," "rhythm," "construction" and all our other critical counters - is merely an abstraction from the total response in the mind of the reader or spectator, brought into being by written or spoken words, and that our duty as critics is to examine first the words of which the play is composed, then the total effect which this combination of words produces in our mind. (The two are of course inseparable.) This applies equally to the novel or any other form of art which uses language as its medium. A Shakespeare play is a dramatic poem. It uses action, gesture, formal grouping and symbols, and it relies upon the general conventions governing Elizabethan plays. But, we cannot too often remind ourselves, its end is to communicate a rich and controlled experience by means of words - words used in a way to which, without some training, we are no longer accustomed to respond. (Knights 6-8)

Here the scholar supports the idea that critics should examine "the words of which the play is composed" and "the total effect" of the play. In this specific case, when talking about Shakespeare the total effect is composed by language, structure and drama. This observation, is indeed relevant for this thesis as well, as it does support the concept previously discussed of the unity of the text. Idea that we see is trasversal to the movement of New Criticism, spanning from the American New Criticism to a more niche variable, sustained by Knights in his study of Shakespeare's drama. In fact, with his inquire on Shakespeare and his characters, the scholar argues that the concept of character is "merely an abstraction from the total response in the mind of the reader or spectator, brought into being by written or spoken words." For him, questions such as "How many children did Lady Macbeth have?" were misleading, because they turned a literary character into a biographical or psychological case instead of analyzing the role of this literary figure within the overall design of the play.

The reasoning at the base of the formalist-modernist tradition converts exactly here: a literary figure must be considered only through a lence of structural criticism. The reader cannot look at the character and feel emotion towards it as it would be misleading and naïve. In the entirety of his essay, Knights truly shows us that his dislike for character talk is not really a theoretical or philosophical analysis of the question of character, but instead it is an expression of his personal situation as a young critic who wanted to promote a new kind of professional and academic literary criticism that could better fit modernism. Knights's essay is famous for challenging the traditional way of studying Shakespeare, and it was a challenge especially towards the work of critics who treated Shakespeare's characters as if they were real people with deep feelings and real lives.

In the paragraph excerpted from his book that I mentioned above, Knights writes that character, like plot, rhythm, construction and all our other critical tools, is just an abstraction from the total response in the mind of the reader or viewer. It is created by written or spoken words and this means that character is not something real, but something made by language. Knights argues that we must first examine the words of which the play is made, and then the total effect that this combination of words creates in our mind. He sustains that a Shakespeare play is a dramatic poem and its goal is to communicate a rich and controlled experience through words.

This is the core of his formalist approach: characters are not living individuals but they exist in function of the drama, shaped by language, structure, conflict, and theatrical form. The modernist-formalist alliance that drove Knights's intellectual passion

dominated literary studies for two generations, so this means that Knights was part of a much larger movement that included modernist writers and formalist critics who's attention was strictly focused on the text itself, not on the author's life or the characters' imaginary lives. However, while Knights was promoting a certain way of reading that focused on language and form, a later generation of critics turned this idea into strict theory. As a matter of fact, the in her article "Real Characters: Literary Criticism and the Existential Turn." published in February 2020, Toril Moi affirms:

> […] sometime after World War II, the taboo on treating characters as if they were real people hardened into a dogma. In the 1950s and 1960s, critics of various formalist persuasions began to treat the taboo as a fundamental axiom, a cornerstone for further theory-building. The result was theory that silently incorporated Knights's professional and aesthetic agenda - his commitment to professionalizing criticism and developing a criticism that could account for modernism - in its foundations. […] When the taboo on treating characters as if they were real hardened into theoretical doxa, it silently incorporated a strong aesthetic commitment to a formal vision of what modernism was.

In this light Moi argues that the rule against treating characters as if they were real people became a basic rule for literary studies and it became almost forbidden to discuss characters as real people. But at the turn of the century there were signs that critics wanted to do more with characters than just say they were textual entities or patterns of meaning. For this reason critics began to return to character analysis, but in new ways that mixed formalist ideas with new theoretical approaches. An example, in the words of the scholar Blakey Vermeule: "in the 21st century, there's been a remarkable return to asking why we care about literary characters, and this question has been addressed by scholars bringing cognitive science, philosophy, and psychology to bear on literary reading." (Vermeule, Introduction)

This will be absolutely useful and of great importance when analyzing the characters of *The Great Gatsby* where we can truly see the different facets that each of them can present, even at a psychological level. In fact, this discourse on formalism and new criticism will be relevant when I'll analyze the characters in the novel because of one main reason: formalist reading treats the novel as an autonomous text and focuses on its language, symbols, narrative structure, irony, and patterns of contrast, rather than on Fitzgerald's biography or the historical 1920s context. A non-formalist approach does the

opposite: it brings in context such as social history, class, gender, race, authorial biography, or reader response to explain what the novel means.

1.1.3 Structuralism

To widen even more our perspective on the anti-humanist side of the debate on character, there is one last movement that in my opinion is worth mentioning, as its contribution to the discussion on character is, in my opinion, very important. I am talking about Structuralism, as this particular movement goes together with formalism and New Criticism in supporting the idea that we must perceive characters as textual constructions, not as persons. All three movements reject the humanist view that characters have psychological depth, consciousness, or moral agency and this is why they are all classified as anti-humanist in the debate about character in literature.

This current of thought is often referred to as a philosophical, scientific and literary movement which developed mostly in France during the 1960s, and it was able to extend the method of linguistic structuralism to anthropology, psychoanalysis and to literary criticism. Its story in relation to character actually finds its starting point in Russia in the 1920s, when Vladimir Propp**,** a Russian folklorist and scholar, began a study which covered 100 folktales and discovered that the constant elements were not the characters themselves, but instead their functions. In the words of Propp:

> Definition of a function will most often be given in the form of a noun expressing an action (interdiction, interrogation, flight, etc.). Secondly, an action cannot be defined apart from its place in the course of narration. […] Function is understood as an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action. The observations cited may be briefly formulated in the following manner:
> 1. Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale.
> 2. The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited. (Propp 20-21)

This approach is essentially anti-humanist because Propp treats the function of characters as any other functions in his text: they have a role in the narrative structure. In fact, in this passage Propp is saying that what matters in a folktale is not the personality of a character but the function that character performs in the plot: an act such as interdiction, violation, departure, or help. Propp argues that these functions are stable elements of narrative, that

they recur in a limited number, and that the same function can be performed by different characters without changing the basic structure of the tale. It is essentially anti-humanist because it shifts attention away from the human subject as unique and self-determined. Humanist criticism usually values the character as a believable person with consciousness, moral depth, and individuality; Propp instead reduces the character to a formal position inside a system of narrative functions. In that sense, the character is not studied as a "person," but as an element of structure. So in Vladimir Propp's theory, the value of a character lies in what it does in the system, not in what it "is" as a human being.

In narratology, Propp's character roles are especially meaningful because they help us identify how characters function within a story and they make sure we focus on analyzing the plot structure rather than focusing only on individual personalities. For structuralists then, the figure of the character is therefore not a simple unit, but a bundle of differential elements that is constructed through oppositions; hence, unlike traditional criticism, structuralism asserts that what matters is not studying the individuality of each literary figure but what function they have in common.

In the 1960s these important discoveries and these exact concepts were then applied to modern narrative by Roland Barthes, a key figure in the structuralist movement and a French literary theorist, who suggested that characters can be seen as "agents" defined by their position in the structure: his work fundamentally transformed how scholars understand character in literature. This author, in his essay "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative" proceeds to quote Vladimir Propp by saying that: "Function is understood as an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action." (Barthes 246) This quote reveals that characters are defined by what they do within the narrative structure and not by the psychological profile, as if they were real people acting in the real world. In this view, it is the structure of the plot which guides the characters' actions, not the opposite. They have no real agency, they are not people, but mere functions. Therefore, a character's identity cannot be understood as stable or coherent; instead, it is merely a bundle of differential elements and characteristics organized together. In Roland Barthes's view, characters do not possess consciousness or psychological depth and they exist solely to serve the narrative structure: "Characters are simply another voice in a weave of voices which comprises the text" and these voices are not personal but rather "functions, positions in the narrative structure." (Barthes 248–249) This view is fundamentally anti-humanist because it denies

characters as stable identities, centers of consciousness, or moral agents with free will, and instead they are grammatical units in the narrative structure, thus they exist only to serve the story's structure, not as representations of real human beings.

1.2 The Humanist Current

The theoretical framework presented so far has been useful for us to outline the main anti-humanist approaches to the question of character, especially through Formalism, New Criticism, and Structuralism. All of these perspectives although different in their methods, share the idea that characters should be considered primarily as textual constructions whose meaning depends on their role within the internal structure of the work. This overview is important because it allows us to understand both the strengths and the limitations of a strictly text-centered approach, particularly when we consider the complexity of the reader's experience.

However, in order to fully address the debate on character, it is now necessary to shift the focus to the other major critical perspective, which is the humanist tradition. In contrast to anti-humanist theories, the humanist approach gives central importance to the reader and to the ways in which a character can generate emotional involvement, ethical reflection, and identification. This suggests that from this point of view, characters are not seen only as formal elements but also as figures that readers can relate to, interpret, and even judge, as if they were quasi-persons capable of evoking identification, empathy, and moral reflection. This perspective is particularly relevant for my research because it allows me to explore the concept of identification in a more productive way.

For this reason, while I recognize the importance of the anti-humanist framework discussed above, my position in this debate is more aligned with the humanist approach, and in the following section I will therefore examine how contemporary humanist critics understand character and why their contribution is essential to analyze the relationship between reader and text, especially in the case study of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. To analyze the characters from this novel, I chose the humanist approach especially because here character interiority, emotional complexity, and readerly identification play a central role. This perspective allows me to examine how Fitzgerald constructs characters as psychologically and morally ambiguous figures, and how the reader's response to them becomes essential to the meaning of the text.

Humanists consider characters as mirrors of the human condition, so they keep the focus on their psychological complexity, their moral agency and their capacity for

empathy. As a matter of fact, humanists believe that characters are able to reflect an intrinsic human dignity. All of the above leads us to the understanding that this current and the scholars who belong to it really do support the idea that a reader can identify with a character and learn from it.

In the modern period, the most influential critical figures are Matthew Arnold, F. R. Leavis, Erich Auerbach, and later Edward Said. I decided to mention their names because these scholars sustain and preserve the idea that literature is not only a formal object but a human practice tied to education, ethics, and culture. Arnold gives humanist criticism its modern moral seriousness; Leavis strengthens close reading and literary discrimination; Auerbach provides historical depth and comparative humanistic reading; Said reworks humanism into a more critical, worldly, and politically aware form. Together, they form the most useful line of influence and make it so that humanism remains relevant in literary analysis today. For my thesis on character and in particular on the characters of The *Great Gatsby*, the humanist approach is persuasive because Fitzgerald's novel is built around consciousness, desire, failure, and moral ambiguity rather than around a purely mechanical narrative structure. That makes humanist criticism particularly effective for examining reader-character identification, emotional response, and the ethical meaning of Gatsby's self-making.

In the context of the debate on literary characters, the British critic F.R. Leavis is known to value characters for their psychological realism and for their ability to represent moral complexity. In fact, he criticizes literature that lacks serious moral engagement and, on the contrary, he praises novels where characters are able to embody authentic human experiences. In his own words:

> The great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad - to stop for a moment at that comparatively safe point in history… it is as well to start by distinguishing the few really great - the major novelists who count in the same way as the major poets, in the sense that they not only change the possibilities of the art for practitioners and readers, but that they are significant in terms of that human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life. […] As a matter of fact, when we examine the formal perfection of [Jane Austen's] Emma, we find that it can be appreciated only in terms of the moral preoccupations that characterize the novelist's peculiar interest in life… the same is true of the other great English novelists… they are all distinguished by a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent opennes before life, and a marked moral intensity. (Leavis 17)

In simpler words, according to Leavis, great novelists do not simply create characters for entertainment or as structural elements of the plot, but instead they make sure to produce characters that fundamentally matter because they change how readers perceive life itself. When Leavis states that major novelists are "significant in terms of the human awareness they promote," he means that characters serve as vehicles for understanding human experience in a deeper and more meaningful way. Therefore characters are not flat or simplistic constructions but instead they possess psychological depth and they reflect real human feelings, choices, and contradictions. Leavis then emphasizes this point by describing great novelists as having "a vital capacity for experience" and "a kind of reverent openness before life," which their characters subsequently embody. This psychological complexity is precisely why readers can engage with them meaningfully.

Furthermore, Leavis insists that moral agency is essential to a well crafted character, in fact the marked moral intensity and the moral preoccupations he identifies in great novelists mean that their characters carry ethical weight and force readers to confront questions about right and wrong, about how to live, and about human values. From this perspective then literary figures are not merely plot devices or functional narrative elements, but on the other hand, they embody moral seriousness that demands real engagement from the reader. This is particularly significant because it directly contradicts the anti-humanist view that characters are "mere assemblages of text" without moral agency or psychological reality. This scholar also argues that the awareness that great characters promote means that literature opens readers to understanding different ways of being human.

This point is essential to my research as it provides a strong theoretical support for arguing that identification with characters in *The Great Gatsby* is not naïve but rather essential to the novel's literary value and meaning. Leavis's claim that characters possess moral agency becomes crucial when we move from the abstract debate about what characters are to the concrete experience of reading: the phenomenon of empathy. On an intellectual level, we are aware that fictional characters are not real people but textual constructions. Yet, nonetheless we feel empathy, judgment, and emotional involvement as if they were. This tension between knowing characters are fictional and responding to them ethically and emotionally is precisely where the humanist approach becomes indispensable.

If characters were merely structural elements or assemblages of text, it would be difficult to explain why readers invest in them with moral significance. By treating characters as figures with moral agency and psychological depth, humanist criticism provides the conceptual tools to understand how identification and empathy can arise from fiction without requiring us to deny its artificiality. In this perspective, when readers engage with characters they enter into their inner worlds, experiencing their thoughts, feelings, and struggles from a perspective outside their own lives. This emotional connection creates what scholars call "narrative empathy", that is to say, the capacity to feel with and for another person through reading.

In this discourse, I find it interesting to name Lisa Zunshine, a cognitive literary theorist who applies cognitive and scientific basis to the humanist claim that identification with characters is natural and meaningful. More specifically, she applies the Theory of Mind research to literary studies, which explores the ability of our brain to attribute mental states, like our thoughts, beliefs, desires and intentions to ourselves and others. In this specific case, Zunshine argues that reading fiction is essentially mind-reading practice in which we track characters' mental states, interpret their motivations, and understand their emotions: this explains why readers naturally identify with characters: fiction provides a safe space to exercise our mind-reading skills. With her contribution to the debate on character, Zunshine is providing scientific evidence for the humanist position, and in her book *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*, published in 2006, she affirms that:

> […] as critics and teachers of literature, we do base both scholarly interpretations and classroom discussions on our 'interest in the characters as possible people and in the narrative world as like our own,' we remain wary about our own and our students' tendency to treat fictional personages as real people. We consider this tendency 'a sentimental misunderstanding of the nature of literature.' We complain, as a colleague of mine did recently, that we 'work so hard on illuminating the elaborately wrought artifice of the fictional world, and then [our students] get carried away by debating if Elizabeth Bennet slept with Mr. Darcy before marriage. She didn't because she never existed!' It seems to me that our unease on this occasion stems from our intuitive realization that on some level our evolved cognitive architecture indeed does not fully distinguish between real and fictional people. (Zunshine 19)

Here Zunshine shows how readers cannot help seeing characters as 'possible people', whose stories, wills and actions are not real, of course, but are to be read as such.

According to Zunshine's view, readers will always read characters as fictional individuals provided with agency, and not as instruments moved in the writer's preset story. This supports the humanist position that identification with characters is not wrong, but rather a scientifically natural process: in fact, readers track fictional characters' mental states using the same mind-reading abilities that they would use in real life, making identification a legitimate and meaningful aspect of literary experience that ends up validating the humanist approach to character analysis.

1.2.1 The Concept of Identification

But what does it really mean to identify with a literary figure? According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the process of identification is a "psychological orientation of the self in regard to something (such as a person or group) with a resulting feeling of close emotional association." But there is another definition of identification that I want to propose and which refers to the concept of identification in a more literary context: this definition is provided by Richard Wollenheim, a British philosopher and a psychoanalyst, who affirmed that identifying with a character involves imagining being and behaving like someone else.

Using drama as a metaphor, Wollheim explained: "In effect what we do when we identify with another is that we write a part for our-selves, based upon the other, in the hope that, when we act it to ourselves, we shall be carried away by the performance." (Wollheim 172) Thus, according to Wollheim, identification demands that we forget ourselves and become the other by assuming the identity of the person we identify with. Nevertheless, we are aware that identifying with a literary character is not a straightforward matter and entails many limitations and dangers; this is precisely why, as we examined in the first part of this chapter, contemporary literary critics who address the concept of identification generally approach it with skepticism and tend to criticize it negatively.

In addition, The scholar Edgar S. Bley argues that the process of identification lies at the foundation of fiction and literature. He strongly maintains that this is precisely what defines whether a piece of fiction is successful or not: the fact that the reader is able to identify with the character of the novel. In his publication titled "Identification: A Key to Literature", he draws precisely on the example of Shakespeare's Hamlet, an example that in this specific case is especially useful for us, given that in the first part of this chapter we discussed Knight's argument regarding Shakespeare and the fact that one should not

extract the character from the text in which it is created, since the character is merely another part of the textual structure. However, Bley vigorously asserts that:

> The contemporaries of Shakespeare identified themselves with Hamlet. […] A large measure of identification must have taken place or the play would have failed. […] Identification is not a device of "escapist" literature, used by irresponsible writers as bait for inadequate readers; it is a process inherent in the purpose of every author of fiction. It is absent from a fiction-reading experience only when author or reader has failed in his purpose. (Bley 27)

The point is that Bley directly opposes the anti-humanist perspective in this essay and argues the very opposite of what we have seen asserted by Formalism, New Criticism, and Structuralism. In my view, this is precisely the importance of this essay, where he emphatically claims that:

> If all words were known to the reader from a dictionary and if words were assembled into complete thoughts by means of mere logic, then it would be possible for him to derive a clear intellectual reaction to a book, unemotional and impersonal. But words do not exist in a vacuum. Meanings do not arise from a mechanical combination of words. When the hero sits on a chair and leans his elbows on a table, somewhere in the reader's mind are evoked at least one actual chair and one table from his apperceptive background. This alone begins an emotional complicity. (Bley 27-28)

This passage from Bley's publication argues that reading is not a purely logical or detached process, but instead that even when a text uses simple words, those words do not stay abstract: they trigger the reader's personal memories, sensory experiences, and emotional associations. Bley's key idea is that when we read about something as ordinary as a chair or a table, we do not picture only dictionary definitions, but we mentally supply our own lived experience of chairs and tables, and that makes reading emotionally involved rather than neutral. In other words, the text becomes meaningful because the reader brings a background of perception and feeling to it. So this quote from Edgar Bley's essay supports the idea that literary meaning is created through the interaction between the words and the reader's mind. I believe this to be especially useful for this debate because it shows why identification and imagination matter in fiction: the reason is that the reader does not just decode language, but he actively and emotionally participates in constructing the experience of the text.

I can't properly conclude the discussion on identification with characters in literature without mentioning the scholar who, from my perspective, has made an outstanding contribution to the advancement of this debate through the introduction of remarkably insightful concepts. I am talking of Rita Felski, one of the most important scholars in the field of literary theory and feminist studies; she powerfully defends identification against the skeptical stance of the anti-humanist currents and sustains that identification is central to fiction rather than a sign of "uncritical" reading.

In her book *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (2020), Felski rejects the idea that emotional engagement with characters is naïve or escapist; instead, she sees it as fundamental to how literature works. This signifies that Felski does not see emotional involvement with characters as something naïve or shallow. Instead, she believes that this kind of response is one of the main ways literature matters to us. When readers feel sympathy, attachment, or even discomfort toward a character, they are not reading badly; they are responding in a fully meaningful way. For Felski, emotion is not separate from understanding but part of it, because it helps readers connect with the text, notice its importance, and make sense of human experiences through fiction.

In *Hooked*, this author contends that "being hooked" is essential to appreciating high art and to enjoying popular culture, in fact, *Hooked* focuses on three mechanisms of attachment that link audiences to artworks: identification, attunement, and interpretation. She proceeds to use various examples drawn from literature, film, music, and painting, and manages to introduce the vocabulary of attachment into academic discourse. *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, is a book which manages to demonstrate that the social significance of artworks is produced not only by critics, but also through the reactions of captivated audiences. Moreover, with her essay "Identifying with Characters" in the book *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies* (2019) she is able to reconstruct the concept of the character and to discuss in a comprehensive way the process of identifying with a literary figure.

Rita Felski also explores the theory of attachment, that she describes as the relationship that forms between a reader and a work of art: it is not only about liking a text, it includes the ways we recognize ourselves in a character, feel ourselves emotionally aligned with a mood or perspective, and make interpretive sense of what we read. Her point is that literature matters because it creates bonds, not because it simply delivers abstract ideas. Felski's theory of attachment is especially useful for *The Great Gatsby* because it explains how readers' emotional and interpretive involvement with Gatsby

contributes to the novel's meaning, making character a site of identification, judgment, and literary significance rather than a merely formal device. This is why I would like to pause and reflect a bit more on Rita Felski, and in particular to take a closer look at her conception of the character.

1.2.2 The Concept of Character

In her essay *Identifying with Characters* (2019), Felski argues that: "Characters do not have to be deep, well-rounded, psychologically complex, or unified to count as characters; nor, of course, do they need to be human. They need only to be animated: to act and react, to will and intend." (Felski 78) This quote fundamentally challenges traditional assumptions about what constitutes a literary character. In fact, instead of focusing on deep psychology or human traits, Felski says that the key component to a literary figure is action. According to her, a character does not need to be complex, unified, or human, the only thing that matters is being "animated". This means the ability to act and react, to want things and to intend to do things; this take is with no doubt very different from traditional character theory, which usually stresses realistic psychology, inner depth, and fully developed human personalities. In this specific case, Rita Felski's idea makes the concept of character more open and more inclusive by allowing non-human beings to count as characters and none of them need to have human psychology or psychological complexity. What counts is their ability to take part in the story through action: making choices, having intentions, and responding to events and other characters. This "animated" quality is what gives them agency and lets readers connect with them as important parts of the story.

Moving forward in her essay, Felski traces how our understanding of fictional characters has changed dramatically over the past decades, and she argues that characters are meaningful beings we genuinely connect with and learn from, not just empty words on a page. She points out that, in the past, antihumanist critics were deeply skeptical about whether fictional characters could be considered real "persons" at all and they insisted that characters were merely signs or symbols: to them considering fictional characters to be real people was seen as the ultimate form of naivety; this particular take that I reported in the first part of this chapter in fact, sustains that characters are just words on a page with no connection to their readers. However, Felski rejects this argument as unpersuasive because characters clearly share important qualities with their readers: they have thoughts, feelings, intentions, and motives just like humans do. Moreover, we constantly

move between fiction and real life without even thinking about it, translating insights we gain from novels and films into how we understand and interact with actual people around us.

Thus, when readers move between fiction and real life, Felski would say this is normal and productive rather than mistaken. Characters matter because they become nodes of attachment: we connect them to our own experiences, moral judgments, and emotional patterns, but we still know they are fictional. For Felski, this is not a flaw in reading; it is one of the ways literature creates meaning and appeal. Zunshine, on the other hand, approaches the issue differently. Where Felski emphasizes attachment, recognition, and the lived experience of reading, Zunshine emphasizes cognition: readers are drawn to fiction because it exercises our capacity to model other minds. In other words, for Zunshine, the pleasure of fiction lies in mindreading; for Felski, it lies in attachment, identification, and interpretive relation.

The difference matters for my analysis of *The Great Gatsby* because Felski helps me explain why readers feel emotionally bonded to a character, while Zunshine helps explain how readers infer their thoughts, motives, and self-deceptions through the text's cues. Felski is more interested in the felt relation between reader and character; Zunshine is more interested in the cognitive work of understanding minds in narrative.

Felski's idea that readers are prone to move between fiction and real life is interesting when we notice that a reader can actually learn from stories and apply those lessons to their real relationships, which proves that characters are not disconnected from human experience. This is why it is important to note, as Felski herself states, that more recently critics have shifted to a different approach to explain why we care so much about fictional characters. Making good use of different kind of approaches to literature, they argue that humans have an innate tendency toward sociability, beign naturally wired to be curious about what other people think, feel, and do. This curiosity isn't accidental; it evolved because understanding others' motives helped us survive.

Fiction taps into this same social instinct and the scholar Blakey Vermule explains it perfectly. She argues that the pleasure we get from stories is similar to the pleasure of gossip or social bonding and she affirms that:

> The "very short answer" to why we develop an attachment and even affection for fictional characters, Vermeule explains, is "gossip." Humans possess an unrelenting "need" to know what

> other people are like; gossip serves as the means by which we can and gather information about the personal and intimate aspects of other people's lives. (Vermeule, Introduction)

Very simply, Vermeule means that we care about fictional characters for the same reason we care about real people: we want to know what they are like, what they feel, and what happens to them. She says this interest is like gossip because gossip is a way of learning about other people's private lives. In his view, when we get attached to a character in a novel, we are doing something similar: we are becoming curious about their personality, feelings, and actions. In short, Blakey Vermule suggests that fiction works because it satisfies our natural curiosity about people. Rita Felski seems indirectly to agree with Vermeule when she states that: "Characters, in short, are portmanteau creatures, assembled out of disparate materials drawn from fiction and life." (Felski 90)

If we care about characters because we want to know what people are like, then identifying with literary figures is the mechanism that lets us enter their perspective, recognize parts of ourselves in them, and feel emotionally involved. In Felski's terms, identification is not just a flawed or childish response, but instead it is one of the normal ways readers become attached to a text. Hence, in simple terms, Vermeule explains why we are interested in characters, and Felski explains how that interest becomes identification.

1.2.3 Identifying with Characters

Rita Felski doesn't just stop at rethinking characters, but also rethinks the concept of identifying with them; in her own words:

> Identifying, then, implies a sense of something shared, but this does not mean obliterating or overriding differences. There is no Vulcan mindmeld, no fusion of viewer and character where we lose all sense of self or capacity for independent thought. To identify with something is not to be identical with it; we are talking about the rough ground of resemblace rather than pure sameness. (Felski 80)

In this quote, this author explains that identifying with a literary character means feeling a deep connection because we are sharing something meaningful with them, which could be emotions, experiences, struggles, or desires. At the same time, she sustains that this connection does not mean we become the same person or lose our own unique identity.

When we identify with a character, we recognize similarities between ourselves and them, which creates a sense of resonance or understanding. However, she emphasizes that this process is not about erasing differences or overriding what makes us distinct individuals. She uses the Star Trek reference to a "Vulcan mindmeld" to illustrate that there is no magical fusion where the reader and the character merge into one entity where we lose all sense of self or the capacity for independent thought. To identify with something is fundamentally not the same as being identical with it. Felski argues that we are talking about the "rough ground of resemblance" rather than pure sameness. This means that identification involves finding similarities while still acknowledging that there are differences that remain between us readers and the characters; in short this scholar is arguing that a reader can relate deeply to a character, feel understood by them, and even see parts of himself reflected in their story, while still recognizing that he is a separate person with his own distinct identity.

Identification is therefore a nuanced process of connection through similarity without requiring complete uniformity or loss of individuality. So, when a reader identifies with a character, they do not become exactly like that character or fully merge with them. Instead, the reader recognizes some shared feelings, desires, fears, or experiences, while still remaining themselves. So identification is based on partial similarity, not total sameness. For example, we might identify with Gatsby's ambition or loneliness even if our life is completely different from his. The connection happens because we see something familiar in him, but we do not stop being our own people. That is why identification is nuanced: it involves closeness, but also distance.

This is why Felski does not stop at the simple notion of identification but proceeds to discern four stands out of this concept, which help us explain how identification with literary characters is not a single, simple concept but rather a complex, multi-layered process. These four strands are: alignment, which feels like a structural connection to the character and happens when the reader gets access to a character's actions, thoughts, and feelings; allegiance, which constitutes the moral evaluation of a character, where we form attachments based on shared values or moral sympathy; recognition, whichever means seeing ourselves or something familiar in the character and recognizing shared human experiences; empathy, that allows us to feel with the character and emotionally resonate with their experiences and emotions. In her essay she tells and explains them very carefully and with great clarity. But despite this, Felski proceeds to affirm that: "This […] does not exclude complexity; to be like a character is not synonymous with liking a

character: a felt affinity can be underwritten by diverse, conflicting, or ambivalent affects." (Felski 79) What this author argues is that identification with a character is not simple or one-dimensional. If a reader feels "like" a character, that does not automatically mean the reader likes them, admires them, or agrees with them: a reader can recognize something of themselves in a character while still feeling conflicted, uneasy, or critical.

My thesis, and therefore my contribution to this debate, converges exactly here: despite the division of the concept of identification into four different branches, Felski's quote emphasizes that identification with a literary character is a deeply complex process that cannot be reduced to simple categories like "liking" or "disliking" a character. When she says that "to be like a character is not synonymous with liking a character," she means that we can feel a connection or affinity with a character even when we don't necessarily approve of them or find them morally good. We might recognize ourselves in a character who makes terrible choices, who is flawed, selfish, or even harmful, and still feel that felt affinity with them. This complexity arises because identification involves diverse, conflicting, or ambivalent affects. For example, a reader might feel empathy for a character while simultaneously criticizing their actions; or the same reader might recognize shared experiences with a character while disapproving of how they handle those experiences; or, again a reader might be drawn to a character's strength while resenting their privilege. These mixed feelings don't cancel out identification; rather, they demonstrate how identification operates on multiple levels simultaneously. We can love and hate a character at the same time, feel drawn to them while judging them, or identify with their struggles while rejecting their methods.

With this being said, we can affirm that identification with a character is always a complicated and difficult process, for many reasons, but above all because not all characters are morally good. Some are cruel, treacherous, or simply unpleasant people, yet readers are often still drawn to them and find themselves reflecting parts of themselves in these figures. Does identifying with Hester Prynne or Arthur Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter* make us traitors? Does identifying with Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian* mean we are all violent and manipulative? Does identifying with some of the hidden thoughts of Patrick Bateman make us all serial killers obsessed with luxury and superficiality? Does identifying with Myrtle Wilson mean we are all driven by money and lust? Does identifying with Tom Buchanan make us rich, arrogant, and violent? And does identifying with Jay Gatsby mean we are all flawed, obsessed with a strange and impossible dream? These questions show that identification does not imply moral

equivalence or personal identity with the character, but on the contrary, that a reader can be emotionally involved with a character while still maintaining critical awareness and ethical distance. This is precisely why identification is a form of emotional connection, not a statement of sameness or moral agreement. A reader may feel sympathy for a character's loneliness, ambition, fear, or desire, even while recognizing that the character behaves badly or makes problematic choices. In that sense, identification allows for closeness without collapsing difference. The reader can enter the character's perspective, but still remain aware that the character is fictional, limited, and ethically distinct from themselves. This is important because it shows that emotional involvement does not weaken critical judgment. On the contrary, a reader can care about a character and still evaluate that character's actions, motives, and consequences. So identification and critique can coexist: one lets us feel with the character, the other lets us think about the character.

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Dichiarazione del ricorso a strumenti di Intelligenza Artificiale (IA)

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Chapter Two
Complex Identification and Moral Ambiguity:
The Case Study of Myrtle Wilson

As established in the preceding chapter, the methodological debate surrounding character in literary studies has undergone a profound critical reassessment over the past three decades. Having moved beyond the rigid binaries of formalist anti-humanism and traditional humanist mimeticism, now contemporary narrative theory demands a more sophisticated understanding of how readers engage emotionally, ethically, and cognitively with literary figures. At the very heart of this methodological transformation

lies the concept of identification: we usually tend to believe readers to be able to identify only with virtuous protagonists or morally good heroes, yet reality is often quite different; readers frequently find themselves deeply involved with characters who are morally compromised and selfish, or deceitful and transgressive.

This chapter discusses the concept of complex identification and builds on Rita Felski's idea that this kind of identification does not depend on moral approval, and at the same time it does not mean that readers simply copy or imitate a character. Instead, it can include mixed and even uncomfortable reactions by readers, who may feel interest and attraction, but also doubt or disapproval. Felski argues that to identify with a character does not mean one has to support everything they do, and it does not mean that the reader shares the same ethics or the same vision of the world. In this case identification is more flexible and more dynamic, it can include moments of distance, when the reader steps back and reflects, it can include irony, or even a sense of sympathy and connection. All these elements can exist together inside the reading experience, and it is precisely this that Rita Felski seeks to dismantle in her seminal essay "Identifying with Characters" in *Hooked: Art and Affect* (2020). Felski points out that identification is neither a cognitive error nor a primitive instinct that educated readers ought to outgrow; rather, it is the fundamental mechanism through which literature establishes connection, meaning, and aesthetic power. Felski writes:

> Identifying is a default rather than an option; a feature, not a bug. Two forms of confusion have led critics astray. Identification is often equated with empathy, or co-feeling – though empathy is just one of the ways in which readers and viewers identify. And it is also conflated with the question of identity, with a fixing or circumscribing of the parameters of selfhood. Both assumptions are ripe for reassessment. Audiences become attached to fiction in an abundance of ways; these ties can be ironic as well as sentimental, ethical as well as emotional. (Felski 83)

Felski's intervention is revolutionary because it liberates identification from both moralistic reductionism and formalist purism. First, Felski challenges the assumption that identifying with a character requires some kind of moral agreement or empathetic warmth. Second, she demonstrates that identifying with a character is a flexible and multi-layered process capable of surprising, reconfiguring, or challenging the reader's self-understanding.

But to fully understand how identification operates without falling into vague generalizations, it is necessary for us to delineate with precision Rita Felski's four distinct modalities or strands of readerly attachment, that I already introduced in the previous chapter. Alignment, allegiance, recognition, and empathy. These four modalities are connected to complex identification because they show that identifying with a character is not a simple process. We do not necessarily identify with a character because we like them or agree with everything they do. Instead, we can feel close to a character in different ways: we can understand their point of view, feel empathy for their situation, recognize something familiar in them, but at the same time disagree with their actions. This is what makes identification "complex". Different reactions can happen at the same time; Felski's four modalities are therefore useful because they help us understand these different sides of our relationship with a character. Disentangling these four strands is essential for analyzing morally complex characters, as it explains how a reader can be intensely bound to a character while remaining critical or ambivalent along another.

The first strand of alignment refers to the formal and structural ways a narrative gives readers access to a character's actions, thoughts and perceptions. In simpler words, alignment places the reader close to a character's mind and senses, and it is important to highlight that alignment does not require moral approval, in this specific case the reader can be strongly aligned with a villain or a deeply flawed protagonist while still rejecting their actions. Alignment is the structural precondition for attachment; it controls what we know about a character and when we know it.

The second strand, allegiance, concerns the reader's moral, ethical, and ideological judgment of a character. Allegiance comes into play when a narrative encourages the reader to form emotional bonds, to hope for a character's success, or to sympathize with their moral position. Unlike alignment, which is built into the narrative structure, allegiance depends on shared values, moral sympathy, or ideological agreement. Yet, as Felski emphasizes, allegiance is rarely absolute, but instead it is often divided or unstable, leading readers to support characters whose behavior conflicts with their own real-world principles.

The third strand, recognition, describes the cognitive and emotional process of encountering something familiar in a fictional figure, like seeing one's own experiences, vulnerabilities, social situations, or hidden desires reflected in the story. Recognition does not require total similarity, but instead it arises from what Felski calls "the rough ground of resemblance" (Felski 88). A reader may recognize in a character an insecurity of his

own or a secret ambition. This is why recognition can narrow the gap between the fictional world and the reader's reality, producing the sense of meeting oneself in the text. The fourth strand, empathy, refers to the experience of co-feeling, or the emotional capacity to feel with or for a character, which results in sharing their grief, fear, joy, or shame. Empathy is often mistaken for the whole of identification, but Felski insists that it is only one possible dimension of attachment. A reader may feel strong empathy for a character without sharing that character's values (allegiance) or seeing themselves reflected in them (recognition).

So, why are these four strands important for my thesis about complex identification? The main point is that alignment, allegiance, recognition and empathy do not necessarily happen at the same time or with the same intensity. A person who reads a book can be strongly aligned with a character because the narrative gives us access to their thoughts and experiences, but this does not mean that we morally support them. In the same way, we can feel empathy for a character and understand their suffering, while still disagreeing with their choices. We may also recognize something of ourselves in a character that we do not particularly like.

This is where complex identification comes from. Our relationship with a literary character can be made of different and sometimes contradictory reactions, so we can feel close to a character and distant from them at the same time, depending on which of these strands we are considering. For this reason, identification should not be seen as a simple question of "I identify with this character" or "I don't identify with this character". It is more useful to ask in what way we identify with them, and where this identification stops or becomes uncomfortable.

The distinction between Felski's four strands then is important if we encounter the case of a morally ambiguous character. A character does not have to be completely likeable or similar to the reader in order to create a strong identification. Actually, it is often the tension between these different responses that makes identification more complex. We can understand someone without approving them, feel sorry for them without supporting their actions, or recognize part of ourselves in someone we would probably dislike in real life. Therefore, Felski's four strands give us a way to break complex identification into different parts and understand why our attachment to certain literary characters can be so contradictory.

2.1 Ambivalence, Resemblance, and the Phenomenon of Complex Identification

Having defined and differentiated the modalities of attachment, we can now address the central theoretical core of this thesis: the phenomenon of complex identification. Traditional views of how we read literature assumed that identification works like simple similarity: readers are thought to identify only with characters who are very much like themselves, but Rita Felski demolishes this equation and asserts that "to identify with something is not to be identical with it; we are talking about the rough ground of resemblance rather than pure sameness" (Felski 88). In order to explain the absurdity of viewing identification as total fusion or identity loss, Felski invokes a popular science-fiction trope, and she states that: "There is no Vulcan mindmeld, no fusion of viewer and character where we lose all sense of self or capacity for independent thought" (Felski 88). So based on this quote we understand that readers do not surrender their critical faculties, moral judgment, or distinct individuality when they identify with a literary figure, but on the contrary, identification occurs in the space between resemblance and difference. This crucial insight allows Felski to formulate the foundational premise for the concept of complex identification, as she sates that: "This does not exclude complexity; to be like a character is not synonymous with liking a character: a felt affinity can be underwritten by diverse, conflicting, or ambivalent affects." (Felski 94) The formulation "to be like a character is not synonymous with liking a character" represents a breakthrough for character studies: it separates readerly resonance from moral approval. This means that a reader can feel a powerful, visceral affinity with a character whom they actively dislike, morally condemn, or find socially repulsive. Complex identification occurs precisely when our emotional attachment to a character is underwritten by conflicted affects, like when sympathy is intertwined with judgment, fascination with disgust, admiration with pity, or affection with resentment.

Complex identification frequently manifests as an uncomfortable resonance with a character such as when a literary text aligns us with a flawed or morally ambiguous character and exposes aspects of our human nature such as selfishness, vanity, jealousy, cowardice, or obsessive longing, that most readers recognize within themselves but prefer to reject or deny. The power of a concept such as complex identification is to be found in its refusal to offer us simple moral comfort, so what happens instead is that this kind of identification compels the reader to confront the messy, compromised, and contradictory nature of human existence.

In Oneself as Another (1992), the philosopher Paul Ricoeur provides a philosophical framework that explains why a concept such as that of complex

identification is actually ethically productive because it makes readers face mixed feelings, see several sides of a situation, and question their own judgments, instead of just copying a character's bad behavior. Ricoeur draws a fundamental distinction between two forms of identity: idem-identity (sameness, immutable traits, numerical identity) and ipse-identity (selfhood, narrative agency, dynamic constancy over time). Ricoeur argues that literature serves as a laboratory for ethical thought because it exposes the gap between idem and ipse. When readers encounter a case of a morally complex character, they do not collapse their own idem-identity into the character's actions; rather, they engage in a process of ipse-reconfiguration, testing their own ethical selfhood against the imagined possibilities of human action (Ricoeur 115). What happens to the readers in the moment of his encounter with a morally ambiguous character, is that they are allowed to explore the fragility of human goodness without surrendering ethical agency: it means that when a reader connects with a flawed character, he can see that being good is not always simple, easy, or stable. At the same time, he does not have to excuse the character's bad choices or to copy them.

The concept of complex identification becomes even more useful when we encounter characters that are morally ambiguous, which becomes particularly present in modernist and postmodernist literature, where conventional heroes are replaced by anti-heroes, social strivers, and compromised narrators. How do readers navigate texts where the protagonist lacks moral virtue or traditional heroic qualities? Felski addresses this question through the concept of ironic identification. In fact, in texts featuring morally ambiguous characters such as Camus's *Meursault in The Stranger*, Gide's *Michel in The Immoralist*, or Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the text deploys irony as both a structural device and an affective buffer. Ironic identification allows the reader to establish a partial, or double-edged attachment to a character. As Felski explains, in modernist narrative:

> Ties of recognition and allegiance prove more pertinent – keeping in mind that these ties may be ambivalent, qualified, partial, or ironic... Deploying irony as both a trope and a structural device, it seems to thwart any desire for attachment. And yet, as Halpern points out, critical testimonies to these ironic or self-qualifying aspects of identification... assume exemplary importance. (Felski 113)

Through ironic identification, the reader enters into a dual relationship with the literary figure. On one hand, formal alignment and vivid characterization draw the reader into the

character's subjective world, fostering cognitive understanding and emotional resonance, and on the other hand, ironic distance enables the reader to evaluate the character's moral failures, illusions, and social transgressions with critical clarity. Rather than canceling each other out, alignment and ironic distance reinforce one another, producing a richly textured reading experience where emotional investment and intellectual critique exist in a productive tension.

However, to fully contextualize the concept of complex identification, it is insightful to connect her work to Hans Robert Jauss's foundational reception theory. In *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982), Jauss established that the aesthetic value of a text is determined by its interaction with the reader's "horizon of expectations", the background of cultural norms, literary conventions, and moral assumptions that readers bring to a text. Jauss mapped out five historical levels of identification: associative (playful participation), admiring (hero worship), sympathetic (feeling for the vulnerable), cathartic (tragic pity and fear), and ironic (critical detachment). Jauss argued that classical literature solicited a kind of admiration or a sympathetic identification, whereas modern literature deliberately breaks the reader's horizon of expectations by inviting cathartic and ironic identification with compromised figures (Jauss 152).The concept of complex identification synthesizes Jauss's cathartic and ironic modalities, showing that modern readerly attachment thrives precisely when a narrative shatters conventional moral expectations.

When a text forces a reader to care about a figure who transgresses societal norms, it destabilizes the reader's horizon of expectations, turning reading into a transformative, hermeneutic event. As we transition from this theoretical overview to the literary analysis of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Felski's theories on identification and the concept of complex identification provide us with the analytical lenses required to decipher the novel's depiction of class anxiety and social striving, in fact with Myrtle Wilson, Fitzgerald is able to construct a character who is very compromised, tacky, adulterous, and tragic. Yet, as the following analysis demonstrates, it is precisely through her moral ambiguity that Myrtle Wilson solicits one of the most profound and complex identifications in twentieth-century American literature.

2.2 An Introduction to the character of Myrtle Wilson: Narrative Perspective and Social Context

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) stands as one of the supreme achievements of American modernist prose, renowned for its incisive critique of the Jazz Age and its structural sophistication. But for us to fully understand how complex identification functions within the novel's depiction of class marginalization, one must first interrogate the structural filter through which all characters are perceived: the first-person narration of Nick Carraway. Fitzgerald's decision to employ Nick as a first-person narrator creates a double structure of alignment that directly conditions the reader's affective and cognitive engagement with Myrtle Wilson.

Nick Carraway presents himself to the reader as a model of Midwestern moral moderation and objective judgment, and in the opening lines of the novel, Nick famously declares:

> In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since. “Whenever you feel like criticizing any one,” he told me, “just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had.” [...] “In consequence, I'm inclined to reserve all judgments. (Fitzgerald 1).

However, relevant literary scholars such as Wayne Booth, Richard Lehan, and Judith Fetterley have noted that Nick's claim to moral neutrality is a self-serving rhetorical performance: this means that Nick is an essentially a biased narrator, an outsider with upper-middle-class origins that leads him to secretly develop class prejudices and snobbery. Furthermore Nick explicitly articulates his own divided consciousness during the drunken apartment party in Manhattan with Tom Buchanan and Myrtle Wilson, reflecting: “I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life” (Fitzgerald 35). This formulation, “within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled”, serves us also as an exact description of the stance of complex identification. When Nick observes Myrtle Wilson, his narrative tone alternates between his upper-class disdain for her working-class vulgarity and a fascinated, visceral attraction to her raw vitality. Thus, by filtering Myrtle through Nick's perspective, Fitzgerald forces the reader into a position of dual alignment. The reader inherits Nick's social distance and ironic judgment, yet simultaneously experiences the irresistible emotional impact of Myrtle's desperate striving.

Furthermore, before analyzing Myrtle Wilson's characterization, it is necessary for us to examine the spatial environment that defines her existence: the Valley of Ashes.

Located halfway between East Egg and New York City, the Valley of Ashes is one of the most famous symbolic settings in twentieth-century literature, and Fitzgerald describes this desolate wasteland in Chapter Two.

> This is a valley of ashes, a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. (Fitzgerald 23)

The Valley of Ashes functions as the spatial manifestation of economic devastation and industrial exploitation, and it is the repository of the waste produced by the wealthy elite of East and West Egg. By living in the Valley of Ashes, George and Myrtle Wilson inhabit a place of gray sterility, overlooked only by the giant, decaying eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. For what concerns George Wilson, the ashes have invaded his very soul: he is described as "covered with a dust-coated vacuum" and "anaemic" (Fitzgerald 25). For Myrtle, however, the Valley of Ashes is an unbearable cage of social death, so understanding the spatial claustrophobia of the Valley of Ashes is essential for us to establish a readerly alignment with Myrtle, and this is why when readers encounter Myrtle in her husband's garage, surrounded by gray dust and failing cars, her desperate desire to escape is immediately noticed and perceived as an existential necessity. The Valley of Ashes establishes the economic and social stakes of Myrtle's striving: to remain in the ashes is to crumble into dust; to reach for Tom Buchanan, on the opposite, is a desperate grab for life itself.

Finally, the complex identification solicited by Myrtle Wilson must be understood within the godless universe of the novel, symbolically overseen by the giant billboard of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg:

> The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic—their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a non-existent nose... But his eyes, dimmed a little by many painless days in the sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground. (Fitzgerald 23)

In Chapter Eight, when a grief-stricken George Wilson drags Myrtle to the window before her death and points to the giant eyes, shouting: "God knows what you've been doing, everything you've been doing. You may fool me, but you can't fool God!" Michaelis

gently reminds him: “That's an advertisement” (Fitzgerald 159). This heartbreaking exchange encapsulates the cosmic vacuum of the novel. The eyes of Eckleburg are not the eyes of a compassionate, judging God: they are the hollow, fading eyes of a forgotten commercial advertisement. In a narrative universe devoid of moral judgment, the burden of ethical evaluation falls completely upon the reader. Fitzgerald offers no heavenly redemption nor a moralizing narrator to resolve Myrtle's fate. By leaving the Valley of Ashes under the stare of a commercial icon, the text urges the reader to engage in complex identification: readers cannot rely on rigid moral categories to judge Myrtle Wilson, but instead they are forced to confront her life, her striving, and her death through the rich, ambivalent, and deeply human terrain of aesthetic affect.

But to fully grasp the mechanics of complex identification in Fitzgerald's portrayal of Myrtle Wilson, one must not stop at the surrounding environment but also take an attentive look into what kind of society is described in the novel: for example it is also very helpful for us to analyze the specific material objects with which she surrounds herself. The 1920s marked the emergence of modern American consumer culture, a period in which mass-produced commodities were increasingly marketed as instruments of personal identity and social mobility. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Thorstein Veblen coined the terms “conspicuous consumption” and “vicarious leisure” to describe how individuals use luxury goods to signal social standing and perform upper-class status. Myrtle Wilson's engagement with material culture in Chapter Two exemplifies a tragic, working-class version of conspicuous consumption. During her brief trip to Manhattan with Tom, Myrtle embarks on a spending spree, purchasing a copy of “Town & Country” and movie magazines, cold cream, a small black-and-white lapdog, and an overly ornate tapestried couch featuring “small ladies riding on swings in the gardens of Versailles” (Fitzgerald 29). For Nick Carraway, these objects represent the height of tasteless vulgarity, but for Myrtle they function as magical fetishes of class ascension. She believes that acquiring this materials may grant her the entry into elite society.

Analyzing Myrtle's consumerism through Felski's framework reveals how readerly attachment operates across class lines. Readers do not mock Myrtle's purchases, but instead through ironic identification they recognize the profound vulnerability driving her material fetishism. In a culture that equates human worth with financial capital, Myrtle's desperate reliance on tapestried chairs and cold cream exposes the psychological violence of class exclusion. Readers identify complexly with Myrtle because her tragic

faith in consumer objects mirrors a universal human vulnerability: the illusion that purchasing the symbols of a desirable life can magically bestow the reality of self-transcendence.

2.2.1 Myrtle Wilson: Vitality, Vulgarity, and the Refusal of Social Erasure

Historically, feminist literary critics such as Judith Fetterley have noted that Myrtle Wilson has suffered from severe critical neglect and misogynistic degradation in traditional scholarship. In her landmark work *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (1978), Fetterley argues that male-dominated literary criticism routinely condemned Myrtle as loud, tacky, adulterous, and sexually rapacious, effectively holding her responsible for her own tragic death while romanticizing the elite characters (Fetterley 72). This author's point is that many readers and critics treated Myrtle not as a character who's fate is tragic in the end, but as a woman whose behavior supposedly justified her destruction. In that framework, Myrtle is described through a moralizing lens: she becomes "loud," "tacky," and "sexual," so attention shifts from the social system that traps her to her own supposed flaws. This matters because Fetterley is exposing a gendered double standard in interpretation: the male characters' violence, privilege, and carelessness are often softened by romance or glamour, while Myrtle is blamed for desire that the novel itself presents as shaped by class and patriarchy. Her affair is therefore read less as a symptom of unequal power and more as personal moral failure.

Similiarely, the scholar Sarah Churchwell observes in *Careless People* (2014) that traditional readings treated Myrtle as a crude, grotesque caricature designed merely to highlight Daisy Buchanan's ethereal elegance (Churchwell 114). Churchwell argues that many of the readings of *The Great Gatsby* reduce Myrtle Wilson to an exaggerated figure, almost a caricature, whose main function is to make Daisy Buchanan appear more refined, delicate, and desirable. In this interpretation, Myrtle is not treated as a complex character with her own desires, frustrations, and social struggles, but as a symbolic contrast to Daisy's beauty and elegance. Churchwell's point is that this way of reading Myrtle is shaped by class and gender bias, because it privileges Daisy's privilege and glamour while dismissing Myrtle's vitality, sexuality, and ambition as vulgarity.

Such a reading also ignores the fact that Myrtle's behavior is deeply connected to the limitations of her social world and the false promises of upward mobility. Rather than seeing her as simply ridiculous, Churchwell encourages readers to notice how the novel

exposes the cruelty of a society that defines women through appearance, class, and desirability. Myrtle's so-called "grotesque" qualities are therefore not just comic exaggerations, but part of Fitzgerald's broader critique of desire in a rigid class system.

By contrasting her with Daisy, traditional criticism often reinforces the very hierarchy the novel questions. Churchwell challenges that habit by restoring Myrtle's narrative significance: she shows that Myrtle is essential to understanding the moral and social tensions of the novel. In this way, Myrtle becomes not a throwaway foil, but a revealing figure through whom the novel's gendered and class-based power structures can be read more critically.

Furthermore, the contrast between Myrtle Wilson and the aristocratic female characters of the novel is articulated through the representation of the female body. In *Rabelais and His World* (1968), Mikhail Bakhtin famously distinguished between the "classical body" and the "grotesque body". In *The Great Gatsby,* Daisy Buchanan and Jordan Baker embody the classical body of elite privilege: they are repeatedly described as "pale, cool, weightless, and hovering above the earth in white dresses, disembodied figures whose voices sound like "money" (Fitzgerald 120). Myrtle Wilson, by contrast, is insistently physicalized as a grotesque body. Fitzgerald emphasizes her "surplus flesh," her smoldering nerves, her energetic movements, and ultimately the graphic brutality of her ripped mouth and spilled blood on the pavement of the Valley of Ashes. Traditional patriarchal criticism often weaponized this bodily contrast against Myrtle, depicting her physicality as evidence of coarse, animalistic vulgarity. From Felski's perspective, this "virgin vs whore" opposition becomes problematic because it influences the way a person who reads this novel is encouraged to identify with these female characters. Daisy and Jordan's controlled, almost weightless bodies are associated with elegance and upper-class femininity, while Myrtle's sexuality and physical presence are constantly emphasized as something excessive and vulgar. In this way, the novel risks encouraging the reader to judge Myrtle not only for what she does, but also for the kind of woman she represents.

With this beign said, Felski's ideas can help us question this reaction. Why should Myrtle's physicality make her less deserving of empathy? And why should the more controlled femininity of Daisy automatically appear more respectable? The important thing is that recognition and empathy do not necessarily depend on moral approval. We can disagree with Myrtle's affair, her obsession with social status, or the way she behaves in the Manhattan apartment, but still recognize the frustration and desire behind her

actions. Her sexuality and her ambition do not cancel her suffering, and this is where complex identification becomes useful. Myrtle can be vulgar, selfish and sometimes even ridiculous, but at the same time she is trapped in a social position from which she desperately wants to escape. A reader can therefore judge some aspects of her behaviour while still feeling empathy for her situation. Felski's approach allows us to resist the simple division between the "respectable" woman and the "fallen" woman, because our attachment to Myrtle does not have to depend on seeing her as morally innocent. In fact, it is exactly this contradiction that makes our identification with her more complex.

While Daisy's classical body is characterized by emotional paralysis and moral carelessness, Myrtle's grotesque body is alive with smoldering desire, appetite, and resistance. When her body is violently broken by Daisy's car, the narrative graphicness of her death forces the reader into an intense, uncomfortable empathetic solidarity. The bloody destruction of her body lays bare the brutal reality of class violence: the classical body of the aristocrat (Daisy) remains untouched behind wealth, while the vital, earthly body of the working-class woman (Myrtle) pays the ultimate physical price.

In this light, re-evaluating Myrtle Wilson allows us to dismantle these elitist and gendered biases, revealing Myrtle as one of the most vital, desperate, and tragic figures in American literature. Within the social hierarchy of the novel, we can see that Myrtle actually occupies a position of severe marginalization: she is working-class, economically dependent, trapped in an unfulfilling marriage, and socially invisible to the aristocratic world of East Egg; so, it is clear that her affair with Tom Buchanan represents her ferocious, unyielding attempt to refuse social erasure. Myrtle's behavior throughout the novel is morally compromised and aestheticized as tacky or vulgar. She treats her gentle husband George with open contempt, cheats on him without remorse, buys absurd status symbols, and adopts an arrogant, exaggerated persona when surrounded by her working-class peers. In conventional terms of moral allegiance, Myrtle fails to present herself as a virtuous heroine.

Yet, Fitzgerald endows Myrtle with an extraordinary physical and emotional presence that commands intense readerly alignment. Fitzgerald introduces Myrtle in Chapter Two with a striking physical description that sets her apart from every other female character in the novel: "She was in her middle thirties, and faintly stout, but she carried her surplus flesh sensuously as some women can. Her face... contained no facet or gleam of beauty, but there was an unmistakable vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually smoldering" (Fitzgerald 25). Unlike Daisy Buchanan and Jordan

Baker, who are repeatedly depicted as pale, cool, bloodless, disembodied, and emotionally exhausted, Myrtle is characterized by an “unmistakable vitality”, a physical smoldering that signifies raw life force. In the dead, ash-choked environment of the Valley of Ashes, Myrtle’s vitality represents an indomitable refusal to be buried alive, and so readers align with Myrtle not because they admire her tacky taste or her treatment of George, but because her vitality evokes a visceral and empathetic response: she embodies the raw and unpolished urge to live.

2.2.2 The Manhattan Apartment and the Performance of Elite Status

The tragedy of Myrtle's complex identification is nowhere more evident than in the scene at the Manhattan apartment in Chapter Two, where she attempts to perform some kind of elite status through displaying her costumes and her theatrical behaviors. Having traveled to New York with Tom, Myrtle decides to purchases a small dog, magazines, and cold cream, and ten they went home to the small, overcrowded apartment Tom rents for their trysts. Here, Myrtle changes her clothes and she puts on an elaborate afternoon dress of cream colored chiffon:

> With the influence of the dress her personality had also undergone a change. The intense vitality that had been so remarkable in the garage was converted into impressive hauteur. Her laughter, her gestures, her assertions became more violently affected moment by moment, and as the apartment grew smaller around her, she seemed to be revolving on a noisy, shaky pivot through the smoky air. (Fitzgerald 30)

This passage offers us an important take on in ironic identification. In fact, the reader witnesses Myrtle's tragic illusion: she believes that wearing a cream colored chiffon dress and adopting an “impressive hauteur” grants her entry into Tom Buchanan's elite world. In reality, as Nick's narration makes painfully clear, the apartment grows smaller around her, exposing her as a temporary instrument for Tom's sexual appetite. In this scene, Nick describes how Myrtle Wilson changes when she puts on an elegant dress for the party in Tom Buchanan’s apartment. But here her clothing doesn’t seem to only alter her appearance: it also transforms her behavior. Nick observes that her lively energy in the garage becomes “impressive hauteur,” meaning an exaggerated sense of pride and superiority. Myrtle begins to act as if she belongs to Tom’s wealthy social world, and we an witness that her laughter, gestures, and opinions become increasingly “affected,” or

artificial and unnatural. She is performing a completely new identity through her clothes, voice, and mannerisms rather than expressing her ordinary self. Furthermore, the clothes also contain a particular symbolism here in this passage, in fact her cream colored dress functions like a costume. It allows Myrtle to temporarily escape her identity as a working class woman and pretend to be a sophisticated, upper class lady. Fitzgerald therefore presents fashion as a form of social performance: Myrtle believes that appearing wealthy can give her the status she desires. However, this transformation also suggests insecurity, because Myrtle's new behavior is so exaggerated, it end up appearing artificial rather than genuinely elegant. Her attempt to imitate the upper classes exposes the social distance between her and Tom's world instead of eliminating it.

Another detail in this scene which suggests that Myrtle doesn't belong in Tom's sophisticated world is the image of Myrtle "revolving on a noisy, shaky pivot". This makes her seem unstable and almost mechanical as she is constantly moving, talking, laughing, and asserting herself, but she has no real control over her position. The "shaky pivot" suggests that her new identity is fragile and depends on Tom, the apartment, and the dress, and even the description of the apartment becoming smaller around her shows how Myrtle's behavior becomes excessive, as she tries to make herself appear more important, the room seems increasingly crowded and oppressive. The "smoky air" contributes to the atmosphere of confusion and moral corruption surrounding Tom and Myrtle's affair. It is clear that the passage wants to criticize the class system of the novel; Myrtle wants to enter the wealthy world, but she can only imitate its external signs: expensive clothes, confident gestures, and arrogant speech. Tom, meanwhile, can move freely between social spaces because he already possesses wealth and status. Myrtle's transformation therefore reveals the unequal relationship between them: she depends on Tom's material power, while he treats her as an accessory to his own pleasure.

Nevertheless Myrtle's performance of elite status reaches its peak when she discusses her marriage to George, declaring dismissively: "'I married him because I thought he was a gentleman," she said finally. "I thought he knew something about breeding, but he wasn't fit to lick my shoe" (Fitzgerald 34). Here Myrtle Wilson explains that she married George because she believed he was a respectable and socially refined man. However, after the marriage, she discovered that he was poor and did not possess the social status she expected. She therefore presents the marriage as the result of a mistake and claims that she immediately regretted it. In this light the word "breeding" is especially important. Here, it does not refer to biological reproduction; it means good manners,

education, social background, and upper class refinement. Myrtle believes that George appeared to have these qualities, but she later judged him as inferior because he lacked money, status, and sophistication. In fact, the expression “he wasn’t fit to lick my shoe” is a strong idiom meaning that George is completely beneath her, and it reveals Myrtle’s arrogance and her desire to see herself as socially superior, even though she comes from a modest background herself. This short but meaningful quotation also shows that Myrtle associates marriage with social advancement as she did not simply expect affection from George; she expected him to provide access to a more comfortable and prestigious life. When he fails to meet these expectations, she turns to Tom Buchanan, whose wealth and social position seem to represent the lifestyle she desires.

This episode in the novel therefore characterizes Myrtle as both ambitious and vulnerable; her desire to escape poverty reflects the unequal social structure of the novel, but her contempt for George shows that she has absorbed the same class prejudices that oppress her. Fitzgerald here uses her words to criticize a society in which people are valued according to wealth, appearance, and social background rather than personal qualities. The scene is also tragic because Myrtle’s belief that Tom can help her rise socially ultimately contributes to her destruction.

So, how do we come to identify with Myrtle? We identify with her because we can understand her desires and frustrations, even if we do not always agree with her actions. Myrtle wants to escape from poverty and have a better life, and this is a very human desire that the reader can understand. We can also feel empathy for her because she really believes that Tom can give her the life she wants. However, as readers, we understand that Tom does not really see her as part of his world and probably never will.

At the same time, our identification with Myrtle is not complete. For example, the way she treats George makes it more difficult to support her. She looks down on him because he is poor, even if she also suffers because of the same class system. So, we can understand Myrtle and feel sorry for her situation, but we can also disagree with some of her choices and behaviours. This is what makes the identification with Myrtle complex: we can feel close to her in some moments, while in others we can feel distant from her.

The truth is that this scene in the apartment holds a lot of meaning for what concerns this particular character because it allows the reader to create identification through Myrtle’s own vulnerability. Her marriage has failed, she feels trapped in a socially inferior position, and she imagines that Tom can offer her access to a more desirable life. A reader can recognize the universal desire for freedom, recognition, and

self-transformation in this ambition of hers, but here is when Fitzgerald also distance between the character and the reader: her statement that George is “not fit to lick my shoe” is deliberately excessive and humiliating. It may provoke disapproval because Myrtle adopts the same hierarchical logic that has marginalized her. Consequently, the reader is encouraged to move between empathy and criticism rather than settling on a single judgment and as the scene proceeds this character recounts with indignation how she discovered that George had borrowed his wedding suit from a friend: “He borrowed somebody's best suit to get married in, and never told me about it... I lay down and cried all night” (Fitzgerald 34). While Nick views her indignation as tacky snobbery, the reader recognizes the deep economic trauma underneath her words: Myrtle’s grief stems from realizing she was condemned to permanent poverty on her wedding day.

Fitzgerald further emphasizes on the brutal reality of Myrtle’s subordination in the violent climax of the apartment party, in fact, when Myrtle asserts her right to speak Daisy's name, Tom asserts his class and gender dominance through a swift and horrific act of physical violence: “Daisy! Daisy! Daisy!” shouted Mrs. Wilson. “I’ll say it whenever I want to! Daisy! Dai–” Making a short deft movement, Tom Buchanan broke her nose with his open hand. Then there were bloody towels upon the bathroom floor” (Fitzgerald 37). This scene reveals the violence and inequality that characterize Tom and Myrtle’s relationship. Myrtle repeatedly shouts Daisy’s name because she wants to challenge Tom and show that she also has the right to speak about his wife. Her words express temporary confidence, but they also reveal her desire to enter the wealthy social world represented by Daisy. However, Tom immediately stops her by breaking her nose.

The phrase “a short deft movement” makes his violence appear quick, controlled, and almost practiced. The word “deft” her becomes particularly important because it usually describes a skilful action, but here it is connected to cruelty, in fact Tom does not need to make a great effort to hurt Myrtle because he possesses physical strength and social power. The interrupted word “Dai–” shows how violently her voice is silenced. Myrtle believes that her relationship with Tom gives her importance, but this moment proves that she has no real power over him; he allows her to wear fashionable clothes, speak confidently, and imitate the upper class, but he does not allow her to challenge his authority. In particular, the broken nose symbolises Myrtle’s humiliation and the collapse of her temporary social performance. The blood on the bathroom towels makes the consequences of Tom’s violence visible and destroys the glamorous atmosphere of the

party. The author makes the concious choice to present Tom as hypocritical because he protects Daisy's name while betraying her through his affair with Myrtle.

Myrtle's ambition and defiance are understandable because she wants to escape poverty and gain respect, but her situation remains dangerous because her social position depends on Tom, therefore, this quotation exposes the connection between gender, class, and violence in the novel. It also shows that the apparent freedom of the apartment party is only an illusion. Underneath the clothes, alcohol, and laughter, there is a deeply unequal relationship in which Tom controls Myrtle's body and voice.

This scene leads the reader to feel both compassion and criticism towards her character, and this ambivalent response happens because the reader realizes that Myrtle is neither simply a victim nor entirely responsible for her situation. Fitzgerald encourages readers to recognize her vulnerability while also questioning the social prejudices that she has adopted, so through complex identification Myrtle finally appears as a contradictory woman shaped by both personal ambition and social oppression.

2.2.3 The Sacrificial Climax: Myrtle's Death and Tragic Realignment

Myrtle's narrative trajectory culminates in one of the most violent and brutal deaths in American literature. Locked in her room by a crazed, jealous George in Chapter Seven, Myrtle looks out the window and sees the yellow car. Desperate to break free, she escapes into the night, rushing directly into the path of the speeding automobile driven unknowingly by Daisy Buchanan. Fitzgerald describes her death with devastating graphic detail.

> Myrtle Wilson, her life violently extinguished, knelt in the road and mingled her thick dark blood with the dust... Michaelis saw Daisy's car... it wavered an instant, then rushed on into the darkness... The mouth was wide open and ripped at the corners for, as though she had choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long. (Fitzgerald 137)

Myrtle Wilson's death is one of the most violent and tragic moments in *The Great Gatsby*. The expression "her life violently extinguished" presents her death as a sudden destruction of energy and hope. Myrtle has always shown a strong desire to escape her poor life and become part of the wealthy social world, however, her life ends in the road, a public and exposed place, rather than in the elegant world she wishes to enter. The image of her "thick dark blood" mixing with the dust connects her body to the Valley of Ashes,

where she lives, and this detail suggests that she cannot escape her social origins even when she tries to change her identity. The dust also proceeds to create an image of poverty, death, and moral emptiness as opposed to her dreams of richness and wealth. Michaelis sees Daisy's car, but Daisy does not stop to help Myrtle. The car "wavered an instant" before disappearing into the darkness, showing Daisy's hesitation and lack of responsibility, in fact although Daisy is driving, the novel later reveals that Gatsby takes responsibility for the accident. This ends up protecting Daisy and allowing her to escape the consequences of her actions. Myrtle, however, has no such protection because she belongs to a lower social class. The description of her open mouth suggests pain, shock, and an unfinished cry; it may also suggest that she dies while still trying to express her vitality and desire for life.

Her death reveals the cruelty of a society in which wealthy people can avoid responsibility. The contrast between Myrtle's blood and Daisy's car shows the unequal value given to different lives, and this is precisely why Myrtle's body remains in the dust, while Daisy continues safely into the darkness. The scene therefore criticises class inequality, careless privilege, and the false promises of the American Dream. Myrtle wants to transform her life, but the social system gives her very little real power and her attempt to escape results in destruction rather than freedom.

Finally, the quotation that describes her final moments makes her death emotionally powerful because the reader can see both her faults and her suffering, in fact this passage is able to create in the reader a kind of identification because the reader can feel both sympathy for Myrtle's suffering and her desire for a better life. At the same time, her selfishness, ambition, and class prejudice make complete identification difficult; so the reader sees her as both a victim of social inequality and a person who sometimes harms others through her own attitudes. In this case her death may produce compassion, but it also encourages some kind of critical reflection; this mixture of closeness and distance is a form of complex identification, and through Myrtle Wilson, the reader recognises the human desire for dignity while questioning the social values that shape her behaviour.

2.2.4 Tom and George: Two Contrasting Dimensions of Myrtle's Life

To fully appreciate why Myrtle Wilson solicits complex identification, it is instructive to compare her with the characters who bracket her life: Tom Buchanan and George Wilson.

By examining these counterpoints, we see how Fitzgerald structures the text to solicit anti-allegiance in the case of Tom, and passive sympathy without identification in the case of George.

Tom Buchanan represents the antithesis of complex identification, and this is why his character is best understood as the novel's clearest anti-identificatory figure: rather than inviting readers to recognize themselves in his desires, fears, or moral conflicts, he produces rejection. His function is not simply to represent "evil," but to dramatize how privilege can eliminate the need for self-examination. In this novel Tom embodies the figure who possesses wealth, social authority, physical strength, and racial status; yet these forms of power do not develop into moral complexity, but instead they protect him from the consequences of his actions and make him increasingly dependent on domination. Right from his first appearance, Tom's body establishes an ideology of authority. Nick describes him as a powerful man whose "enormous power" seems concentrated in his physical presence, suggesting that Tom's social identity is inseparable from force. His body becomes a visible emblem of inherited privilege: he does not need to persuade others through intelligence or ethical credibility because his wealth, masculinity, and status already command the room. This physical dominance also anticipates his violence: Tom's strength is not neutral; it becomes the instrument through which he disciplines women, intimidates men, and protects the hierarchy from which he benefits. His racism is another important characteristic that reveals that his identity depends upon exclusion:

> "Civilization's going to pieces," broke out Tom violently. "I've gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things. Have you read The Rise of the Colored Empires' by this man Goddard?" "Why, no," I answered, rather surprised by his tone. "Well, it's a fine book, and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be - will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved." […] "Well, these books are all scientific," insisted Tom, glancing at her impatiently. "This fellow has worked out the whole thing. It's up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things." (Fitzgerald, 10)

When Tom invokes Goddard's supposedly "scientific" theory of white supremacy, he does not merely express a private prejudice. He attempts to transform social anxiety into a political principle, presenting domination as self-defence. His claim that the white race may be "submerged" exposes the contradiction at the centre of his character: the man who

possesses immense power imagines himself as a threatened victim. The fantasy of racial danger allows Tom to portray his own supremacy as necessary rather than oppressive. In this case, therefore, his racism functions psychologically as a defence of inherited privilege. Scholarly discussions of the novel similarly connect Tom's racial ideology with his fear of challenges to his class and masculine authority.

This point is especially important for identification theory. Readers may identify with characters who possess recognizable inward tensions such as Gatsby's longing, Daisy's uncertainty, Nick's ambivalence, or even Jordan's self-protective detachment. Tom, by contrast, offers almost no accessible interior struggle and his desires are immediate and acquisitive, while his anxieties are displaced onto racial, sexual, and class "threats." He does not ask whether his conduct is justified; he assumes that his position justifies it. Consequently, the reader is denied the psychological openness that usually makes identification possible. Even Tom's treatment of Myrtle demonstrates the relation between desire and contempt in his character. In this case he wants Myrtle sexually, but he does not recognize her as an autonomous subject. To him, she is valuable as an object that confirms his power over a woman of a lower class and this is why his affair is not an act of emotional vulnerability comparable to Gatsby's idealized love for Daisy. It is just an extension of his entitlement, where can violate the social and marital rules that he expects others to obey because those rules are flexible for men of his class.

The violence in the apartment scene makes this entitlement absolutely explicit: when Myrtle repeatedly says Daisy's name, Tom responds by breaking her nose. The action is sudden, disproportionate, and revealing: he treats speech itself as an act of insubordination. Myrtle's insistence threatens the boundaries Tom wishes to maintain between his respectable marriage and his illicit affair and to him this act of violence restores those boundaries by physically silencing her. The scene makes anti-allegiance almost unavoidable because the reader sees that Tom's power operates through the destruction of another person's voice. Even Tom's relationship with Daisy is similiarely governed by possession rather than intimacy, his character is unfaithful, yet he reacts with outrage when Daisy's attachment to Gatsby becomes visible. This double standard demonstrates that Tom does not understand marriage as a reciprocal ethical commitment, but instead for him marriage secures property, reputation, and social legitimacy, while sexual freedom remains a privilege available to him. Daisy's possible disloyalty, however, threatens his ownership of the social image represented by her. His jealousy is therefore less evidence of love than of possessiveness.

Another confirmation of Tom's manipulative power happens during the confrontation at the Plaza Hotel, where Gatsby attempts to challenge Tom's authority by insisting that Daisy never loved her husband. Tom counters not through emotional honesty but through exposure, insinuation, and social intimidation when he says to Gatsby: "I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife. Well, if that's the idea you can count me out... Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white." (Fitzgerald, 99) by stating this he emphasizes Gatsby's uncertain origins and criminal associations in order to re-establish the distinction between inherited wealth and newly acquired money. Tom's argument is effective because the social world of the novel recognizes his authority as legitimate and he does not need to be morally right; he only needs to appear socially authorized. In this sense then, Tom is the opposite of Gatsby, who is morally compromised, but possesses an imaginative capacity that allows readers to understand his longing. His dream may be impossible and destructive, yet it gives him an inner dimension.

Tom has no equivalent transcendent desire and he does not imagine a better self or a future redeemed by love, his movements are defensive and repetitive: he preserves what he already owns. While Gatsby reaches toward an ideal, Tom retreats into inherited structures of race, class, and patriarchy. His lack of vulnerability is therefore not the same as strength, but it is a form of emotional impoverishment. This is why he avoids vulnerability by converting every relationship into a hierarchy. If another person desires him, he may exploit that desire; if another person challenges him, he attacks; if another person suffers because of his decisions, he withdraws behind his privilege. His apparent confidence conceals not a rich interior life but an inability to encounter others as equals. Tom's role in the episode of Gatsby's death goes to intensify even more this moral structure, in fact Tom does not directly kill Gatsby, but he directs George Wilson toward him by suggesting that Gatsby owned the yellow car and was Myrtle's lover. The information is presented as though Tom were merely identifying the guilty party, yet he knows that Wilson is grief-stricken and unstable. Tom thereby converts Wilson's desire for revenge into a weapon. His manipulation is effective because he transfers his own responsibility onto another man, and this indirectness is central to Tom's anti-allegiance. He is not conventionally heroic enough to act openly, nor sufficiently reflective to recognize his guilt. He causes destruction while maintaining the appearance of distance

from it. The novel's moral economy makes this especially disturbing: Gatsby dies, Myrtle dies, and Wilson dies, while Tom and Daisy retreat into the security of their wealth. Critics have therefore argued that Tom's failure to prevent Gatsby's murder constitutes a form of moral culpability, even when he is not the physical agent of the killing.

Furthermore, Tom's final protection is the social system itself. Nick describes Tom and Daisy as careless people who "smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money." This observation identifies the structural basis of Tom's impunity: money does not merely provide comfort after wrongdoing; it prevents wrongdoing from becoming a lasting threat to identity. Tom can act violently and irresponsibly because wealth absorbs consequences that would destroy less privileged characters. The reader's anti-allegiance consequently has both moral and formal dimensions, because morally Tom's racism, violence, adultery, and manipulation produce condemnation and formally Fitzgerald constructs him through repeated external signs of aggression, interruption, and domination, giving the reader little access to compensating inwardness.

Tom is not complex because he contains many conflicting motives; he is complex in a different sense, because his personal brutality is inseparable from larger systems of racial and class power. This makes clear that his apparent simplicity is therefore functional rather than accidental, in fact Tom embodies the social order that permits complexity for some characters and denies humanity to others. Gatsby can be romanticized because his dream gives him symbolic depth; Daisy can be interpreted through her conflict between desire and security; Nick can narrate because his ambivalence creates interpretive space. Tom, however, occupies the position of the person who closes interpretive space through certainty and force. For this reason, Tom solicits not identification but ethical distance. Readers are encouraged to understand how he operates without emotionally affiliating with him. This distinction is crucial: anti-allegiance does not mean that Tom is aesthetically useless or psychologically empty, on the contrary, his lack of redeeming inwardness allows Fitzgerald to expose the mechanisms by which privilege sustains itself. His character teaches readers to distrust social authority when it is detached from responsibility.

Ultimately, Tom represents the antithesis of complex identification because he refuses the mutual recognition on which identification depends. He recognizes others only according to their usefulness, threat, or subordination. His racism reduces entire populations to enemies; his misogyny reduces women to possessions; his class

consciousness reduces human worth to social origin. The reader cannot comfortably inhabit Tom's perspective because his perspective is built upon the denial of other people's full humanity.

Tom Buchanan's anti-allegiance is therefore one of the novel's most important ethical effects: by making him powerful but not admirable, protected but not innocent, and emotionally closed rather than vulnerably conflicted, Fitzgerald prevents readers from confusing social success with moral value; in this novel Tom survives not because he is justified, but because the world around him is organized to preserve men like him, and his final significance lies in this unsettling contrast: he lacks the grand dream that makes Gatsby tragic, yet he possesses the real power to destroy lives.

George Wilson, on tre other hand, is presented as a weak and emotionally defeated man who seems trapped by poverty and disappointment. In particular, Nick describes him as "an anaemic, faintly handsome man," (Fitzgerald 25) suggesting that he lacks physical energy and has been worn down by his difficult life; but what is important for us is that George's relationship with Myrtle also reveals his lack of power: although he wants to keep her, she treats him with contempt and secretly has an affair with Tom. When George says that he needs money to leave West Egg and that he and Myrtle are going west, he briefly expresses a desire to change his life:

> What do you want money for, all of a sudden?" "I've been here too long. I want to get away. My wife and I want to go West." "Your wife does," exclaimed Tom, startled. "She's been talking about it for ten years." He rested for a moment against the pump, shading his eyes. "And now she's going whether she wants to or not. I'm going to get her away. (Fitzgerald, 94)

The repeated statements "I've been here too long," "I want to get away," and "go West" express George's dissatisfaction with his present life, in fact The Valley of Ashes is presented as a bleak, polluted, and economically stagnant place, and George's wish to leave it reflects a desire to escape poverty, failure, and hopelessness. On the other hand, the West represents more than a geographical destination: it suggests a possible fresh beginning, much as the American Dream promises that people can remake themselves through ambition. Here, Tom's surprised response "Your wife does" reveals that he already knows about Myrtle's desire to leave, while George has apparently been unaware of how strongly she wants to escape their marriage and environment. This irony is important: George imagines that he and Myrtle share the same dream, while Myrtle's

actual dream is connected to Tom and to the wealthy world of the East Egg elite. The character of Myrtle Wilson wants to rise socially, whereas George wants simply to escape his material circumstances, and their ideas of a better life are therefore fundamentally different. The husband sees the West as a place where he and his wife might start again; but Myrtle is set on Tom and she sees him as a means of entering a more glamorous and prosperous world.

However, George's hope quickly disappears after Myrtle's death. He becomes "a white ashen figure" and later appears to Nick as "a blanched, disillusioned man," language that reflects both his physical suffering and the destruction of his remaining hopes (Fitzgerald 25; 137). George's grief is genuine, but it is directed by Tom, who tells him that Gatsby owns the yellow car. In this way, George becomes an instrument of Tom's revenge without understanding the truth.

Readers therefore feel pity for George because he is poor, deceived, betrayed, and manipulated, but they do not deeply identify with him because he rarely acts independently or actively creates a future for himself. Unlike Myrtle, who struggles visibly against her social limitations, George appears increasingly passive and defeated by them; in this novel his tragedy is powerful, but his lack of agency creates emotional distance: the reader observes his suffering rather than sharing an active desire or conflicted ambition. George thus represents the individual crushed by the social system, while Myrtle represents someone who actively resists that system, even through morally questionable choices.

Applying Rita Felski's theoretical framework to Myrtle Wilson ultimately allows for a broader critical rehabilitation of the "unpleasant" or "flawed" female character in modernist literature. Patriarchal critical tradition has long penalized female characters who express material ambition, sexual agency, or dissatisfaction with domestic poverty, labeling them as grotesque or morally corrupted. But Felski's model of complex identification helps us dismantle this double standard by decoupling identification from moral approval. Establishing that "to be like a character is not synonymous with liking a character" (Felski 94), Felski enables critics to analyze female striving without demanding that female figures adhere to traditional norms of passive virtue or polished elegance. Myrtle Wilson's smoldering vitality, tacky affectation, and fierce refusal of class erasure demonstrate that readerly attachment thrives in the messy, contradictory space of human desire. Readers resonate with Myrtle not because she is a blameless

victim, but because in her chaotic, flawed, and tragic struggle for a larger life, she reflects the discomfiting, unvarnished truth of human vulnerability.

This is why I chose the character of Myrtle Wilson to express the concept of.complex identification: she invites readers to feel with her without allowing them to admire or excuse her completely; complex identification does not require a character to be morally good, innocent, or psychologically consistent, but instead it describes the reader's shifting involvement with a figure whose desires, weaknesses, and contradictions produce both sympathy and discomfort. Myrtle enters *The Great Gatsby* with "perceptible vitality," and Nick's imagery of her "smouldering" nerves presents her as intensely alive in contrast to the grey deadness of the Valley of Ashes. Her energy suggests a powerful desire to escape poverty, boredom, and social invisibility, making her longing for a larger life immediately recognizable, but at the same time, her relationship with Tom is ethically compromised because it depends on adultery, economic inequality, and the exploitation of her aspirations. Myrtle does not merely suffer under class oppression; she also attempts to imitate the very values that exclude her, using clothes, speech, consumer goods, and theatrical behavior to perform a higher social identity. Her "tacky affectation" therefore has a double meaning: it can appear ridiculous because she imitates the manners of the wealthy imperfectly, but it also reveals how desperately she wants dignity, pleasure, and recognition. Readers may judge her vanity while recognizing that her performance is a response to a class system that has denied her legitimate access to those things.

Myrtle's identification value lies precisely in this instability: readers can recognize their own wishes for transformation in her, while also confronting the embarrassing possibility that ambition may become imitation, cruelty, or self-deception. The people who read this novel therefore move between emotional proximity and critical distance: they feel Myrtle's hunger for life, recoil from her pretensions, understand her dependence on Tom, and condemn the destructive choices through which she pursues freedom, and this movement is the essence of complex identification, since the reader's response continually changes rather than settling into uncomplicated sympathy.

Myrtle is an excellent example because she makes identification an ethical and affective negotiation, not a simple act of becoming or approving. In her chaotic struggles we see the reflection of the vulnerability of human beings who want more than their circumstances permit and who may pursue that desire through damaging means, so n the end we identify with Myrtle not because she is blameless, but because her contradictions reveal that human longing is often inseparable from vanity, error, dependence, and hope.

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Dichiarazione del ricorso a strumenti di Intelligenza Artificiale (IA)

Il/La sottoscritto/a Alessia Scolaro, matricola numero 876384, iscritto/a presso Ca' Foscari al corso di Laurea magistrale in Lingue e Letterature Europee, Americane Postcoloniali, autrice dell'elaborato finale/tesi di laurea Character and Ambivalent Identification: A Reading of *The Great Gatsby*, relatrice Filomena Mitrano, consapevole delle sanzioni previste dall'art. 76 del Testo unico, D.P.R. 28/12/2000 n.445, e della decadenza dei benefici prevista dall'art. 75 del medesimo Testo unico in caso di dichiarazioni false o mendaci, sotto la propria personale responsabilità ai sensi degli artt. 46 e 47 del D.P.R. 28/12/2000 n. 445, DICHIARA di aver fatto ricorso a tecnologie di intelligenza artificiale generativa per supportare vari aspetti della ricerca e della scrittura del suo elaborato finale/della mia tesi di laurea, in particolare per revisione e ottimizzazione dei testi per migliorare chiarezza e coerenza, supporto alla scrittura. Strumenti ultilizzati: Chat GPT e Gemini. DICHIARA INOLTRE che tutto il materiale generato dall'IA è stato attentamente verificato, rivisto e rielaborato dall'autrice, che si

assume la piena responsabilità per la qualità, l'accuratezza e l'integrità scientifica del lavoro.

Chapter Three

Nick Carraway, Jay Gatsby, and the Lived Experience of Complex Identification

3.1 The Problem of Character and the First-Person Witness

In the previous chapters I explored the critical debate surrounding the literary character and analyzed how readerly attachment operates in modern narrative fiction. In Chapter One, I examined the twentieth-century conflict between the major anti-humanist currents, and the contemporary affective and cognitive theories that have successfully rehabilitated the category of character. I demonstrated that for several decades, influential theorists like Gérard Genette, Roland Barthes, and Cleanth Brooks attempted to reduce fictional persons to simple textual markers, linguistic signifiers, or abstract narrative functions, warning readers and students that emotional involvement with characters was an uncritical and naive error; however, thanks to the groundbreaking work of contemporary theorists such as Rita Felski, Blakey Vermeule, and Lisa Zunshine, modern literary

studies has recognized that our emotional attachment to characters is not an impediment to critical thinking, but rather the fundamental condition that makes literature meaningful and ethically resonant.

In her seminal works *Uses of Literatur*e (2008) and *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (2020), Rita Felski convincingly argues that readers do not engage with novels merely to perform cold semiotic dissections, but to experience deep forms of connection, recognition, and empathy. Building upon this foundations, Chapter Two applied Felski's framework to an in-depth case study: the character of Myrtle Wilson in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Through Myrtle, we analyzed the phenomenon of complex identification, demonstrating how readers are drawn into an ambivalent solidarity with a character who is socially marginalized, vulgar, adulterous, and desperate, but whose raw physical vitality and refusal of social erasure command our emotional attention.

Having established how complex identification functions in relation to a secondary, tragic figure like Myrtle Wilson, this third chapter takes our investigation to a higher and more ambitious level: in fact, in conventional literary criticism identification is almost exclusively analyzed as an external relationship that takes place between the person who reads and the fictional character printed on the page. Scholars typically ask: how does a reader identify with a protagonist? What mechanisms allow an external audience to care about an invented being? However, in F. Scott Fitzgerald's masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby* (1925), the dynamic of complex identification is not only an external event, but it also happens directly inside the text itself. The narrator and central protagonist of the novel, Nick Carraway, lives a dramatic and transformative case of complex identification on his own skin with the enigmatic figure of Jay Gatsby.

Nick Carraway's position in the narrative is unique in American literature, in fact he is not an omniscient storyteller who observes the action from a safe distance, but on the contrary, he is both an intradiegetic character and the only filter that we have of the narrative consciousness. When he arrives in New York in the spring of 1922, renting a modest eighty-dollar a month bungalow in the rich suburb of West Egg on Long Island, he is placed directly next door to Jay Gatsby's castle. Over the course of that summer, Nick is invited into Gatsby's private life, rides in his flashy yellow car, lunches with his criminal associates in Manhattan, acts as the facilitator for his adulterous reunion with Daisy Buchanan, and listens to his most intimate confessions late into the night. Because of this intimate proximity, Nick does not experience Gatsby as a distant cultural myth or a glamorous celebrity; he experiences him from up close, as a flawed, living human being.

What makes Nick's experience so remarkable and then turns his narrative into a supreme case study of complex identification, is exactly the radical contradiction at the core of his feelings: Nick observes every single dark side and corrupt behavior that defines Jay Gatsby, so he discovers Gatsby's fabricated autobiography, he learns firsthand that Gatsby's immense fortune is derived from illegal bootlegging, stolen bonds, and an active criminal alliance with underworld figures, and experiences Gatsby's clumsy attempt to bribe him with an illicit business deal. He also witnesses his delusional demand to force time backwards and repeat the past, and watches with horror as Gatsby displays an almost chilling lack of empathy for the gruesome death of Myrtle Wilson, caring only about protecting the hit and run driver: Daisy.

Under any standard system of ethics, an honest and sensible man would immediately distance himself from such an individual. Moreover, we know that Nick Carraway was raised in three-generation Midwestern family where moral restraint and personal integrity are held as sacred principles. On the opening page of the novel, Nick introduces himself by recalling the advice of his father: “Whenever you feel like criticizing any one... just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had” (Fitzgerald 1), leading Nick to declare that he is “inclined to reserve all judgments” (Fitzgerald 1). Yet, towards the beginning of the novel Nick shatters this illusion of calm neutrality by confessing the moral disgust that Gatsby initially provoked in him: “Gatsby, who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn” (Fitzgerald 2). Gatsby represents everything Nick's Midwestern training teaches him to reject: flashy ostentation, theatrical falseness, lawlessness, and criminal corruption. At the end of the novel, Nick openly admits to the reader: “I disapproved of him from beginning to end” (Fitzgerald 154). From an ethical, rational standpoint, Nick never pardons or excuses Gatsby's bad behavior.

And yet, despite this total moral disapproval, Nick's emotional reality tells a completely different story: instead of turning away from Gatsby, Nick becomes his closest confidant, his loyal defender and his moral accomplice. Immediately after stating that Gatsby represented everything he scorned, Nick writes these words of unconditional wonder:

> If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles

> away... It was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again. No – Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men. (Fitzgerald 2)

Here we touch the core paradox that will guide this entire chapter. Nick simultaneously feels "unaffected scorn" and absolute fascination; he morally disapproves of Gatsby's crimes, yet he believes that Gatsby had "something gorgeous about him" and that he "turned out all right at the end." This internal contradiction is not a logical flaw on Nick's part, but rather the vivid reality of complex identification. Nick lives in a state of emotional ambivalence, torn between ethical rejection and affective solidarity. He seems to discover that human attachment does not follow the rules of moral philosophy: we do not only love or identify with people who are innocent and virtuous; on the contrary, we frequently form our deepest, most enduring bonds with figures who are profoundly compromised, because their vulnerability and their struggles mirror our own existential longings.

3.2 Theoretical Framework: Rita Felski and the Mechanics of Complex Identification

To fully understand how Nick Carraway experiences his relationship with Jay Gatsby, it is necessary to establish a theoretical framework based on contemporary narrative theory and character analysis. For most of the twentieth century, academic literary studies treated the concept of identification with great suspicion, and critics argued that identifying with characters was a sentimental, naive, or intellectually regressive habit. Roland Barthes, for example, challenged the idea that characters should be understood as real people with complete and stable personalities. From a structuralist and post-structuralist perspective, he viewed characters instead as constructions made from language, cultural codes, and narrative conventions. Within this critical orthodoxy, readers were therefore encouraged to maintain an objective, ironic distance from the text, treating characters as formal constructs rather than as beings worthy of emotional investment.

In recent decades, however, this taboo has been decisively dismantled by feminist scholars and theorists: preeminent among these voices is Rita Felski, whose foundational

works *Uses of Literature* (2008) and *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (2020) have restored emotional engagement to the center of literary theory. Felski argues that attachment is not an error or a psychological weakness that educated readers must outgrow; on the contrary, attachment is the very condition that makes reading possible, powerful, and transformative. In *Hooked*, Felski challenges the long-standing prejudices against identification by demonstrating that connecting with characters is an evolved, universal human practice:

> Identifying is a default rather than an option; a feature, not a bug. Two forms of confusion have led critics astray. Identification is often equated with empathy, or co-feeling – though empathy is just one of the ways in which readers and viewers identify. And it is also conflated with the question of identity, with a fixing or circumscribing of the parameters of selfhood. Both assumptions are ripe for reassessment. Audiences become attached to fiction in an abundance of ways; these ties can be ironic as well as sentimental, ethical as well as emotional. (Felski 83)

Felski's crucial insight is that identification is neither simple nor monolithic. Traditional literary critics often assumed that identifying with someone meant admiring their virtues, approving of their morals, or desiring to imitate them. According to this conventional view, if a character commits crimes, tells lies, or acts selfishly, a reader cannot identify with them without becoming morally corrupted. Felski proves that this assumption is completely false. In reality, human beings frequently form powerful attachments to figures who are deeply flawed, morally compromised, or transgressive. Felski writes that 'to be like a character is not synonymous with liking a character: a felt affinity can be underwritten by diverse, conflicting, or ambivalent affects' (Felski, Hooked 79). In other words, we can recognize a part of ourselves in someone whose actions we openly condemn, and we can feel an intense emotional loyalty toward someone whose lifestyle violates our ethical principles.

This is precisely what contemporary theory defines as complex identification. Unlike simple identification, which relies on straightforward moral admiration or uncritical hero worship, complex identification is characterized by internal conflict, ambivalence, and emotional contradiction. It occurs when our affective bonds and our ethical evaluations pull in opposite directions. In a state of complex identification, the

observer experiences a double movement: an intellectual or moral distance that recognizes the character's faults, accompanied by an emotional or existential pull that refuses to abandon them.

To analyze the mechanics of this complex attachment, Felski deconstructs the overarching concept of identification into four interrelated but distinct modalities: alignment, allegiance, recognition, and empathy. These four modalities, originally adapted from cognitive film theorist Murray Smith and expanded by Felski into literary phenomenology, provide the precise analytical instruments needed to understand Nick Carraway's bond with Jay Gatsby, in fact when we examine how these four modalities operate within Nick Carraway, we discover the exact architecture of his internal drama. Nick has total structural alignment with Gatsby: he is the privileged eyewitness to Gatsby's life. However, Nick's Midwestern moral conscience produces a sharp ethical critique of Gatsby's actions: Gatsby is a bootlegger, an impostor, a liar, and an associate of gangsters. From a purely rational, ethical standpoint, Nick should refuse allegiance. Yet, as Nick observes Gatsby's intense vulnerability and listens to his romantic memories, the modalities of recognition and empathy are intensely activated. Nick recognizes in Gatsby's absurd dream a noble and poetic yearning for beauty that makes the cynical, selfish elite of East Egg look completely rotten. Consequently, Nick grants his total allegiance to Gatsby, standing by his side against the entire world.

This dynamic is further enriched by considering the narrative theory of Wayne C. Booth. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1983), Booth examines the role of the dramatized, first-person narrator. This scholar argues that when a narrator is an active character inside the story, their perspective is inevitably shaped by personal feelings, biases, and emotional attachments (Booth 155). Nick Carraway repeatedly claims that he is an objective, honest, and non-judgmental observer who merely records the facts. But Booth's theory helps us see that Nick's narration is deeply affective: Nick does not simply report Gatsby's actions but he actively interprets them, frames them, and guides the reader toward a profound emotional sympathy for a man he knows to be a criminal. Nick is an unreliable narrator not because he maliciously lies, but in my opinion because his emotional allegiance to Gatsby colors every word he writes.

Furthermore, the philosophical work of Paul Ricoeur in *Oneself as Another* (1992) offers an indispensable lens for understanding why Nick's complex identification with Gatsby is ethically productive rather than corrupting. Ricoeur draws a fundamental distinction between two dimensions of identity: idem-identity and ipse-identity; idem-identity refers

to the characteristics of a person that remain stable over time, such as habits and personality traits. Ipse-identity refers to the sense of being the same person even when we change, grow, and make new choices.

Ricoeur argues that literature serves as an ethical laboratory where readers and characters test their ipse-identity against imagined possibilities of human action (Ricoeur 115). When Nick identifies with Gatsby, he does not collapse his own idem-identity into Gatsby's criminal lifestyle; Nick does not become a bootlegger or a swindler. Instead, he engages in a process of ipse-reconfiguration: by confronting Gatsby's flaws and loving him in spite of those flaws, Nick expands his own moral consciousness, learning that true human value is not measured by rigid social rules, but by the capacity for hope, fidelity, and sacrifice.

Finally, this theoretical model connects to Hans Robert Jauss's reception aesthetics in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982). This scholar established that great literature derives its aesthetic and historical power by challenging the reader's "horizon of expectations", the established network of moral conventions, social prejudices, and literary expectations that an audience brings to a text. Jauss showed that while popular or trivial fiction offers comfortable, simplistic identification with spotless heroes, modernist literature shatters conventional expectations by soliciting cathartic and ironic identification with compromised, morally ambiguous figures (Jauss 152). In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald shatters both Nick's horizon of expectations and the reader's horizon of expectations: by forcing Nick to live a complex identification with Jay Gatsby on his own skin, Fitzgerald transforms a Jazz Age crime story into a profound meditation on the contradictions of human attachment.

3.3 Textual Analysis: From Fascination to Disillusionment: Nick Carraway's Complex Identification

The initial stages of Nick Carraway's complex identification with Jay Gatsby begin long before the two men ever exchange a word. In narrative fiction, the first presentation of a major character establishes the foundational horizon of expectations for both the narrator and the reader. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald deliberately delays Gatsby's physical entrance into the dialogue until Chapter Three, allowing Gatsby to exist initially as an enigmatic silhouette, a subject of wild social gossip, and a theatrical enigma. By presenting Gatsby through layers of mystery and contradiction, Fitzgerald positions Nick in an unstable stance where fascination and suspicion immediately collide.

The reader's and Nick's first visual encounter with Gatsby occurs at the end of Chapter One. Nick has just returned home to West Egg late at night after his suffocating dinner with Tom, Daisy, and Jordan at East Egg, an evening where he discovered Tom's vulgar racism and his shameless adultery with Myrtle Wilson. Standing outside his small bungalow in the summer dark, Nick suddenly notices that he is not alone:

> The silhouette of a moving cat wavered across the moonlight, and turning my head I made out that I was not alone, fifty feet away a figure had emerged from the shadow of my neighbor's mansion and was standing with his hands in his pockets regarding the silver pepper of the stars. Something in his leisurely movements and the secure position of his feet upon the lawn suggested that it was Mr. Gatsby himself, come out to determine what share was his of our local heavens. I decided to call to him... But I didn't call to him, for he gave a sudden intimation that he was content to be alone, he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward, and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness. (Fitzgerald 20-21)

Nick observes Gatsby not as a loud party host, but as a solitary figure performing a silent, almost religious ritual in the dark. The gesture of stretching out trembling arms toward an invisible green light across the black water is an image of profound, mysterious longing. Nick intuitively senses that this man is driven by an intense private devotion that sets him completely apart from the cynical, careless world of East Egg. Even at a distance of fifty feet, the modality of alignment establishes an immediate bond of curiosity: Nick respects Gatsby's solitude, choosing not to break the spell. Yet, at this stage, Nick does not know what the green light means, leaving Gatsby's identity suspended between the sublime and the suspicious.

This initial impression of mysterious nobility is radically complicated in Chapter Three, when Nick finally attends one of Gatsby's colossal weekend parties. Here, Fitzgerald immerses Nick in the dazzling, chaotic world of West Egg, where hundreds of guests arrive without invitations, consume enormous quantities of illegal alcohol, dance to jazz orchestras, and treat Gatsby's home like an amusement park. What shocks Nick most is the complete absence of personal connection between the host and his guests. People who have never met Gatsby gladly drink his champagne while spreading

malicious, grotesque rumors about his past. During the party, Nick overhears several conversations among the young women:

> "Somebody told me they thought he killed a man once." A thrill passed over all of us. The three Mr. Mumbles bent forward and listened eagerly. "I don't think it's so much that," argued Lucille sceptically; "it's more that he was a German spy during the war." One of the men nodded in confirmation. "I heard that from a man who knew all about him, grew up with him in Germany," he assured us positively. "Oh, no," said the first girl, "it couldn't be that, because he was in the American army during the war... but you look at him sometimes when he thinks nobody's looking at him. I'll bet he killed a man." (Fitzgerald 44)

This passage is important for understanding Nick's alignment with Gatsby. Since Nick is the narrator, the reader is strongly aligned with him: we enter the party through his experience, we hear the rumors when he hears them, and we know only what he knows about Gatsby. At this moment, Nick has very little information about his mysterious neighbor, so the reader is placed in the same situation of uncertainty. At this point, Nick is in an interesting position, he is physically aligned with the other guests because he is standing with them and listening to their conversation. When he says that "a thrill passed over all of us," he even includes himself in the reaction of the group. This is important because Nick is not completely separated from these people. He is also curious and fascinated by the strange stories about Gatsby. For a moment, he participates in the same fascination that affects the other guests.

However, Nick's attitude starts to become different from theirs. The guests seem happy to accept the rumors because they make Gatsby more interesting and mysterious. They do not really need to discover the truth. Nick, instead, wants to understand who Gatsby really is. Therefore, his alignment with the guests is only temporary. He shares their position as an outsider who knows very little about Gatsby, but he does not completely share their way of judging him. This creates two different levels of alignment. First, the reader is aligned with Nick because all the information about Gatsby comes through his narration. Second, Nick himself is slowly becoming more aligned with Gatsby. At the beginning this alignment is weak because Nick can only observe Gatsby from the outside. He has no access to his past, his feelings or his real intentions. However, his desire to discover the truth already separates him from the other guests. This is important because Nick becomes a kind of bridge between Gatsby and the reader. At first,

Gatsby is distant from both of us. Nick hears the same rumors that we hear and has the same questions that we have. As Nick gets closer to Gatsby, the reader also gets closer to him. When Gatsby later tells Nick about his life, and when Nick discovers his relationship with Daisy, our knowledge of Gatsby increases together with Nick's.

Therefore, Nick's alignment is not fixed during the novel. It changes from distance and suspicion to a much more personal understanding of Gatsby. The reader follows this movement because Fitzgerald does not give us an independent point of view. We depend on Nick. This is important for complex identification because our attachment to Gatsby develops together with Nick's attachment. We first see Gatsby as a mystery, then as a suspicious man, and finally as a more vulnerable and human character. However, Nick never completely ignores Gatsby's problems and lies. For this reason, his growing closeness to Gatsby does not automatically become complete moral approval.

Moreover, Nick's search for the truth leads him into one of the most brilliant and revealing scenes in the novel: the encounter with the drunken, bespectacled guest known as Owl Eyes in Gatsby's Gothic library. Hoping to escape the noise of the garden, Nick and Jordan Baker enter the library, where they find a stout, middle-aged man examining the bookshelves with wild astonishment:

> "About that. As a matter of fact you needn't bother to ascertain. I ascertained. They're real." "The books?" He nodded. "Absolutely real, have pages and everything. I thought they'd be a nice durable cardboard. Matter of fact, they're absolutely real. Pages and, here! Lemme show you." Taking our scepticism for granted, he rushed to the bookcases and returned with Volume One of the 'Stoddard Lectures.' "See!" he cried triumphantly. "It's a bona-fide piece of printed matter. It fooled me. This fella's a regular Belasco. It's a triumph. What thoroughness! What realism! Knew when to stop too, didn't cut the pages. But what do you want? Did you expect him to read them?" (Fitzgerald 45-46)

Owl Eyes' discovery is a critical moment of revelation for Nick. In theatrical history, David Belasco was a legendary American producer famous for constructing hyper-realistic stage settings, such as building a complete, functioning restaurant on stage to create an illusion of reality. By calling Gatsby a "regular Belasco," Owl Eyes exposes the theatrical, manufactured nature of Gatsby's entire identity. Gatsby has purchased thousands of genuine leather-bound books to create the illusion of an old-world,

aristocratic library. Yet, as Owl Eyes points out with drunken genius, Gatsby “didn't cut the pages.” In the 1920s, expensive books were printed on folded sheets that had to be physically sliced open with a paper knife before they could be read; uncut pages prove that Gatsby has never actually read a single volume in his magnificent library.

This scene perfectly captures the paradox of Gatsby's self-construction, and it triggers the first spark of complex identification inside Nick. Gatsby's library is undeniably a fake performance, an artificial costume designed to impress others. But at the exact same time, Gatsby's performance is not a hollow, cynical lie. If Gatsby had merely wanted to deceive people cheaply, he would have bought fake cardboard book-spines; instead, he spent a fortune on genuine, physical books. There is an extraordinary, touching sincerity in his commitment to the illusion. As Owl Eyes exclaims: “What thoroughness! What realism!” Nick realizes that Gatsby is an artist of his own life, a man who builds real stage sets to support an invisible dream.

A few moments later, Nick finally meets Gatsby face to face, sitting at a table in the garden without realizing who he is. They discover that they were both in the infantry in France during the war, sharing a brief memory of the wet marshes. When the stranger casually announces that he is Gatsby, Nick is embarrassed, but Gatsby instantly dissolves the tension with his legendary smile:

> He smiled understandingly, much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced, or seemed to face, the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just so far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey. Precisely at that point it vanished, and I was looking at an elegant young roughneck, a year or two over thirty, whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd. Some time before he introduced himself I'd got a strong impression that he was picking his words with care. (Fitzgerald 48)

This passage demonstrates the double edged nature of Nick's alignment. The first half of the description shows the power of empathy and charismatic connection: Gatsby's smile offers “eternal reassurance” and an “irresistible prejudice in your favor.” Nick feels an immediate, visceral attraction to Gatsby's capacity to believe in people. But notice what happens the exact instant the smile vanishes: Nick's critical intellect immediately reasserts

itself. Nick sees an “elegant young roughneck” whose speech is an unnatural, theatrical performance, “picking his words with care.” Nick recognizes that Gatsby's aristocratic gentleman persona is a mask that barely conceals a rough, uneducated background. This passage is important because it shows how Nick’s alignment with Gatsby becomes more personal, but also more complicated. Until this moment, Gatsby has mainly been a mysterious figure surrounded by rumors. Here, Nick finally experiences Gatsby directly, and his famous smile creates an immediate emotional connection between them. Nick describes it as having a quality of “eternal reassurance,” as if Gatsby is able to make another person feel completely understood and accepted. For a moment, Nick is not simply observing Gatsby from the outside anymore. He is personally affected by him.

The description of the smile also helps us understand why Gatsby attracts people. Nick feels that Gatsby sees him exactly as he wants to be seen. The smile makes him feel important and understood. This creates a stronger alignment because Gatsby is no longer only an object of Nick’s curiosity, there is now an emotional connection between the two characters. However, this connection does not last without problems. As soon as Gatsby stops smiling, Nick immediately becomes more critical. He describes him as an “elegant young roughneck” and notices that his formal way of speaking almost sounds ridiculous. He also realizes that Gatsby is carefully choosing his words, and this suggests that Gatsby is performing a version of himself rather than behaving completely naturally. Nick can therefore feel the difference between Gatsby’s real personality and the identity he is trying to present.

This is where Nick’s alignment becomes complex. He is attracted by Gatsby’s warmth and his ability to make people feel understood, but at the same time he notices that something about him is artificial. Nick does not have to choose between these two reactions. He can be emotionally close to Gatsby while remaining suspicious of him. This passage therefore shows an early form of complex identification: Nick begins to feel a real attachment to Gatsby, but his critical judgement never completely disappears.

Through Rita Felski's theoretical lens, this first personal encounter establishes the classic conditions of complex identification. Nick does not fall into uncritical, blind hero worship, but instead he notices the theatricality, the uncut books, the rumors of murder, and the strained phrase “old sport.” Yet, he is profoundly moved by the radiance of Gatsby's spirit and his dedication to wonder. Nick's Midwestern moral defenses remain active, but his emotional curiosity has been completely captured. He is drawn into

Gatsby's orbit, suspended between the critical awareness of an impostor and the emotional reverence for an extraordinary dreamer.

The second major stage of Nick Carraway's complex identification unfolds in Chapter Four, which marks the definitive transition from external observation to intimate complicity. In this chapter, Fitzgerald subjects Nick to a dramatic two part revelation: first, the exposure of Gatsby's fraudulent autobiography and his active involvement in organized crime; and second, the discovery of the romantic secret that justifies this entire colossal enterprise. By confronting Nick with the criminal dirt of Gatsby's world before revealing his noble motive, Fitzgerald forces Nick, and through him the reader, o experience the profound moral tension of complex identification.

The episode begins on a brilliant July morning when Gatsby arrives at Nick's cottage in his car. The vehicle itself is a symbol of Gatsby's ostentatious, new-money persona: “It was a rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hat-boxes and supper boxes and tool boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of wind-shields that mirrored a dozen suns” (Fitzgerald 64). Gatsby invites Nick to accompany him to New York for lunch, but as soon as they cross the desolate expanse of the Valley of Ashes, Gatsby turns to Nick with sudden anxiety and asks: “Look here, old sport... what's your opinion of me, anyhow?” (Fitzgerald 65). Before Nick can manage a polite, evasive reply, Gatsby announces that he wants to reveal the truth about his past because he does not want Nick to believe the scandalous gossip circulating at the parties.

What follows is an extraordinary performance of self-invention that immediately arouses Nick's deepest skepticism. Gatsby recites his personal history with the rhythm of a badly rehearsed theatrical monologue:

> “I'll tell you God's truth.” His right hand suddenly ordered divine retribution to stand by. “I am the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West, all dead now. I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford, because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years. It is a family tradition.” He looked at me sideways, and I knew why Jordan Baker had believed he was lying. He hurried the phrase “educated at Oxford,” or swallowed it, or choked on it, as though it had bothered him before. And with this doubt, his whole statement fell to pieces, and I wondered if there wasn't something a little sinister about him, after all. “What part of the Middle est?” I inquired casually. “San Francisco.” “I see.” (Fitzgerald 65)

Nick's Midwestern background makes him acutely sensitive to geographic and cultural authenticity. When Gatsby identifies San Francisco as the “Middle West,” the geographical absurdity is so glaring that Gatsby's aristocratic facade completely crumbles. More importantly, Nick notices Gatsby's physical difficulty in articulating his lies: Gatsby “choked on” the phrase “educated at Oxford.” Gatsby continues his tale by claiming that after his family died, he inherited an immense fortune and lived “like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe... collecting jewels, chiefly rubies, hunting big game, painting a little” (Fitzgerald 65-66). Nick's intellectual reaction is one of biting irony and suppressed laughter:

> With difficulty I kept my laughter from breaking out. The very phrases were so worn, so threadbare, that they evoked no image except that of a turbaned “character” leaking sawdust at every pore as he pursued a tiger through the Bois de Boulogne. (Fitzgerald 66

Here, Nick's perceptual alignment produces intense ironic distance. Gatsby appears not as a romantic hero, but as a cheap, wooden puppet stuffed with sawdust. Even when Gatsby pulls out physical props, a medal from the Order of Danilo of Montenegro and a photograph of himself with cricket players at Oxford, Nick remains deeply suspicious. He recognizes that Gatsby is an impostor, and he wonders whether this theatrical stranger is involved in something genuinely dangerous and corrupt.

Nick's suspicion of sinister criminality is violently confirmed as soon as they reach Manhattan. Gatsby takes Nick down into a dark, subterranean restaurant on Forty-second Street for lunch, where he introduces him to his intimate business partner, Mr. Meyer Wolfsheim. Wolfsheim is depicted as an older gambler with heavy Jewish stereotypes common in 1920s literature, whose presence immediately darkens the narrative. As they eat, Wolfsheim reminisces about the brutal gangland execution of his associate Herman 'Rosy' Rosenthal outside the Metropole hotel, creating an atmosphere thick with violence. Then, Wolfsheim draws Nick's attention to his bizarre cufflinks:

> “I see you're looking at my cuff buttons.” I hadn't been looking at them, but I did now. They were composed of oddly familiar pieces of ivory. “Finest specimens of human

> molars," he informed me. "Well!" I inspected them. "That's a very interesting idea." "Yeah." He flipped his sleeves up under his coat. "Yeah, Gatsby's very careful about women. He would never so much as look at a friend's wife." (Fitzgerald 72-73)

The grotesque image of cufflinks made from human teeth represents the absolute decline of moral decency. Human molars turned into jewelry symbolize ruthless violence, physical exploitation, and the ultimate dehumanization of enemies in the criminal underworld. Immediately after Wolfsheim leaves the table, Nick asks Gatsby who this terrifying man is. Gatsby answers casually: "Meyer Wolfsheim? No, he's a gambler... He's the man who fixed the World's Series back in 1919" (Fitzgerald 73). Nick is schoked by this revelation: "It never occurred to me that one man could start to play with the faith of fifty million people" (Fitzgerald 73).

Through this encounter, Nick discovers the grim, unvarnished reality behind Gatsby's fortune. James Gatz is not a noble prince; he is a professional bootlegger, an associate of gangsters who fix national sports, sell counterfeit bonds, and wear human teeth on their wrists. As biographical scholar Matthew J. Bruccoli emphasizes in *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur* (2002), Gatsby's criminality was not a harmless game; it was part of the violent, organized syndicates that corrupted American public life during Prohibition (Bruccoli 178). In the novel, Gatsby's crimes can seem almost secondary, and the reader easily focuses on his love for Daisy, his parties and his dream of becoming part of the upper class. However, Gatsby did not become rich in an innocent way. His money is connected to illegal activities and to people such as Wolfsheim, who represents the criminal world of the period. This creates an important problem for the reader, in fact Gatsby can be charming, romantic and sometimes vulnerable, but he is not an innocent person. His dream of being with Daisy does not make his criminal activities disappear, and Fitzgerald therefore gives us different reasons to feel close to Gatsby, but also important reasons to remain critical of him.

This is where complex identification becomes important. We can understand why Gatsby wants to become rich and why he wants to create a new life for himself, we can also feel empathy for his love for Daisy and for his impossible dream, but at the same time, we do not have to accept the methods he uses to reach that dream. Understanding Gatsby is not the same as saying that everything he does is right.

Nick experiences a similar conflict, and he becomes more and more emotionally connected to Gatsby, but he never completely ignores his lies or his criminal connections.

This means that his attachment is not simple or complete. Gatsby remains both attractive and problematic, and from a conventional ethical perspective, Nick should immediately sever all ties with Gatsby. A decent, law-abiding Yale graduate would not associate with a man who profits from the criminal underworld.

Yet, Fitzgerald orchestrates a breathtaking reversal later that same afternoon. Nick meets Jordan Baker for tea at the Plaza Hotel, and Jordan reveals the hidden core of Gatsby's life. She recounts how, five years earlier in Louisville in 1917, the young Lieutenant Gatsby fell desperately in love with eighteen year old Daisy Fay. Jordan explains that Gatsby's entire fortune, his colossal house, and his endless parties were created for one single purpose: to recapture Daisy's love. Jordan reveals that Gatsby bought his mansion in West Egg specifically so that Daisy would be just across the bay in East Egg, and that he wants Nick to invite Daisy to tea so he can meet her again.

When Nick hears this revelation, his entire cognitive and emotional understanding of Gatsby undergoes a revolutionary transformation. The ridiculous lies, the cream-colored car, the vulgar library, and even the dark shadow of Meyer Wolfsheim are suddenly illuminated by a sacred, romantic light. Nick reflects with poetic awe:

> When Jordan Baker had finished telling all this we had left the Plaza for half an hour and were driving in a victoria through Central Park... “Gatsby bought that house so that Daisy would be just across the bay.” Then it had not been merely the stars to which he had aspired on that June night. He came alive to me, delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendor. (Fitzgerald 78)

The sentence “He came alive to me, delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendor” marks the exact psychological birth of complex identification inside Nick Carraway. The shift is bery profound: before this moment, Gatsby's luxury was “purposeless splendor”, which is a meaningless, tacky display of ill-gotten wealth, but now, Nick realizes that this colossal machine of money and crime was animated by love. Gatsby became a bootlegger not out of greed or malice, but because in the rigid, money worshipping society of America, illegal wealth was the only weapon strong enough to breach the aristocratic walls of East Egg and win back Daisy Fay.

Nick is deeply moved by the disproportion between Gatsby's colossal empire and the modesty of his request: “The modesty of the demand shook me. He had waited five years and bought a mansion where he dispensed starlight to casual moths, so that he could

“come over” some afternoon to a stranger's cottage” (Fitzgerald 78). Through Rita Felski's concepts of recognition and empathy, we see how Nick's moral reservations are overcome by emotional solidarity. He recognizes in Gatsby's absurd devotion a pure, incorruptible human yearning, and he realizes that while Tom Buchanan uses his inherited wealth for arrogant domination and careless cruelty, Gatsby uses his dirty money in service of an ideal of beauty.

Here, Nick lives complex identification on his own skin with full ethical awareness. Nick does not forget Wolfsheim's human teeth, nor does he forget that Gatsby chokes on the word Oxford: the criminal reality remains fully visible in his eyes. Empathy is also important here: this narrator can understand Gatsby’s hope and his desire to return to the past, even if he knows that this dream is probably impossible; this emotional understanding makes it more difficult for Nick to judge Gatsby only on a moral level. But Nick chooses to grant his allegiance to Gatsby. He agrees to invite Daisy to tea, effectively consenting to become the secret facilitator of a reunion between his married cousin and an underworld bootlegger. Nick's conventional Midwestern morality is compromised, but his emotional loyalty to Gatsby's romantic dream has become absolute.

This is exactly where Felski’s ideas help us understand complex identification. Nick does not need to morally approve Gatsby in order to feel close to him. His allegiance and empathy become stronger, while his moral judgement remains more negative. By agreeing to arrange the meeting with Daisy, Nick even acts because of this emotional attachment. His identification with Gatsby has become strong enough to influence his own choices, even when these choices go against some of the values that Nick normally believes in.

The third episode in this analysis takes place in Chapter Five, which represents the emotional centerpiece of the entire novel: the private tea reunion between Jay Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan at Nick's cottage. This chapter is constructed around two opposite moments that illustrate the psychological complexity of Nick's identification; the first moment, he is confronted with the ugliest aspect of Gatsby's criminal mentality: his belief that all human relationships can be bought with money, and the second moment where Nick witnesses Gatsby stripped of every theatrical defense and paralyzed by vulnerability, which evokes an irresistible surge empathy.

The episode opens late at night, two days before the scheduled tea party. When Nick returns home to West Egg at two in the morning, he is surprised to find Gatsby's entire mansion blazing with electric light from tower to cellar, looking like the World's Fair,

though there is no sound of music or guests. As Nick walks along the path, Gatsby suddenly emerges from the darkness, crossing the lawn with agitated steps; he is visibly nervous and he makes anxious conversation about the weather and inspects Nick's small house. When Nick confirms that he will invite Daisy on the day after tomorrow and promises to have his grass cut, Gatsby attempts to express his gratitude. However, having lived for years in a brutal commercial underworld where nothing is given freely, Gatsby does not understand how to accept a generous, neighborly favor. He believes that Nick must be compensated, and he clumsily attempts to recruit him into an illegal business operation:

> "You see, I carry on a little business on the side, a sort of side line, you understand. And I thought that if you don't make very much – You're selling bonds, aren't you, old sport?... Well, this would interest you. It wouldn't take up much of your time and you might pick up a nice bit of money. It happens to be a rather confidential sort of thing."
> I realize now that under different circumstances that conversation might have been one of the crises of my life. But, because the offer was obviously and tactlessly for a service to be rendered, I had no choice but to cut him off there. (Fitzgerald 82-83)

This dialogue exposes the deeply corrupted nature of Gatsby's social conditioning, in fact Gatsby assumes that Nick is assisting him not out of human sympathy or kindness, but because he expects a financial payout. Gatsby's offer is essentially an insult: it treats a personal favor between neighbors as a commercial service to be bought with dirty money. Nick's Midwestern sense of dignity and personal honor is outraged. The phrase "obviously and tactlessly for a service to be rendered" demonstrates Nick's sharp moral evaluation: he recognizes Gatsby's crude lack of social tact, his commercialization of human affection, and his assumption that everyone has a price. Nick immediately shuts down the conversation, refusing to participate in Gatsby's "confidential" rackets.

In standard narrative situations, such an offensive bribe would destroy any possibility of friendship; a conventional moral observer would cancel the tea party and refuse to have anything more to do with a criminal who attempts to corrupt him, but Nick's complex identification with Gatsby is already too deep. Nick looks past the clumsy insult because he intuitively understands the desperate anxiety that produced it. Nick realizes that Gatsby's attempt to buy his loyalty is not a sign of arrogance, but a pathetic symptom of his insecurity. Gatsby is terrified that Daisy will not come, and in his panic, he relies on

the only language he knows: the language of financial transactions. Nick forgives the transgression and proceeds with the plan. If we look at this scene through Felski's lenses of analisys, Nick's identification with Gatsby here involves a movement between distance and closeness. This means that morally Nick remains distant: he refuses Gatsby's money and recognizes the "tactless" nature of the proposal, but on the other hand, emotionally, he moves closer to Gatsby because he understands the vulnerability behind the mistake. Gatsby becomes more than "a criminal" or "a rich man" in Nick's eyes, and the narrator begins to perceive the frightened and insecure person underneath Gatsby's carefully constructed identity.

This also explains why the incident does not end their relationship. If Nick judged Gatsby only according to conventional morality, the offer could confirm that Gatsby is corrupt and should be avoided, but istead, Nick continues helping him arrange the meeting with Daisy. We can sense how identification here complicates moral judgment rather than eliminating it. Nick does not think "Gatsby is right", but his response is closer to: "What Gatsby is doing is wrong, but I understand why he is doing it." That difference is central to us if we read this scene through to Felski's lenses. Therefore, Nick is placed in an uncomfortable position. He is simultaneously observer, judge, sympathizer, and participant. He sees Gatsby's moral problems from the outside, yet he has become emotionally involved enough to help Gatsby achieve his dream. The more Nick understands Gatsby's desire for Daisy, the harder it becomes for him to treat Gatsby simply as a criminal. His identification allows Gatsby's hopes and anxieties to become emotionally meaningful to him, even when they conflict with Nick's own moral standards. Through Felski, we can therefore see Nick's relationship with Gatsby not as simple approval but as an emotional attachment that survives moral disagreement.

The following afternoon, when Daisy arrives in the pouring rain, the glamorous image of the untouchable bootlegger collapses into complete ruin. Gatsby arrives at Nick's door looking like a ghost: "in a white flannel suit, silver shirt, and gold-colored tie, hurried in. He was pale, and there were dark signs of sleeplessness beneath his eyes" (Fitzgerald 84). When Daisy enters the living room, Gatsby is so terrified that he literally sneaks out the back door into the torrential rain and knocks on the front door again, pretending that he has just arrived. When he finally sits down opposite Daisy, the tension is agonizing:

> Gatsby, his hands still in his pockets, was reclining against the mantelpiece in a strained counterfeit of perfect ease, even of boredom. His head leaned back so far that it rested against the face of a defunct mantelpiece clock, and from this position his distraught eyes stared down at Daisy, who was sitting, frightened but graceful, on the edge of a stiff chair. 'We've met before,' muttered Gatsby. His eyes glanced momentarily at me, and his lips parted with an abortive attempt at a laugh. Luckily the clock took this moment to tilt dangerously at the pressure of his head, whereupon he turned and caught it with trembling fingers and set it upright. Then he sat down, miserably, as if he had been caught in some unpardonable fault. (Fitzgerald 86)

This moment is rich with symbolic and emotional resonance. The defunct clock that tilts and almost smashes onto the floor symbolizes Gatsby's impossible desire to stop, control, and rewind time. But what matters most for our analysis of Nick's complex identification is Gatsby's physical terror. The “trembling fingers,” the “distraught eyes,” and the total breakdown of his carefully practiced composure reveal a man who is utterly defenseless. A moment later, when Daisy leaves the room to wash her face, Gatsby flees into the kitchen and collapses into pure panic:

> “This is a terrible mistake,” he said, shaking his head from side to side, “a terrible, terrible mistake.” “You're just embarrassed, that's all,” and luckily I added: “Daisy's embarrassed too.” “She's embarrassed?” he repeated with incredulity. “Just as much as you are.” “Don't talk so loud.” “You're acting like a little boy,” I broke out impatiently. “Not only that, but you're being rude. Daisy's sitting in there all alone.” (Fitzgerald 87-88)

We can see here the extraordinary transformation in Nick's attitude. Nick does not treat Gatsby as a dangerous figure or as a wealthy neighbor who insulted him the night before. Instead, Nick treats him with affectionate impatience, like an older brother speaking to a frightened child: “You're acting like a little boy... Not only that, but you're being rude.” Nick steps in to manage Gatsby's emotional collapse, reassuring him that Daisy is just as terrified as he is, and pushing him back into the room to face the reality of his dream.

Through Rita Felski's theoretical framework in Hooked, this scene illustrates the decisive role of vulnerability in creating complex identification. Felski argues that identification is most powerfully ignited when a character's social mask falls away,

exposing their raw, unvarnished humanity. When Gatsby acts like an “overgrown child” who is terrified of being rejected by the woman he loves, Nick's moral reservations about the bribe and the bootlegging completely evaporate. Nick sees that behind the colossal mansion, the imported cars, and the criminal connections is a desperately lonely, wounded human being who has staked his entire life on a single hope. In this Nick is no longer merely observing Gatsby’s vulnerability; he is emotionally responding to it and actively helping him through it.

According to Rita Felski, identification does not require complete similarity or moral agreement, but we can become attached to people who are very different from us because we recognize emotions, desires, or weaknesses that are deeply human. Gatsby and Nick are very different socially and morally, but Gatsby’s fear in this scene creates precisely this kind of connection. His criminal background, enormous wealth, mysterious parties, and carefully constructed identity temporarily disappear. What Nick sees instead is a man terrified of rejection. Gatsby becomes recognizable to Nick not because Nick shares his lifestyle, but because he can understand the universal emotions underneath it: embarrassment, insecurity, hope, and fear: this then explains the importance of Nick calling Gatsby a “little boy”, in fact the phrase reduces the distance between the two men. Gatsby has spent years constructing himself as an impressive, wealthy and almost mythical figure, but Nick now sees behind this performance. The powerful Gatsby becomes emotionally helpless, and significantly, Nick does not exploit this moment to condemn him, instead, he reassures Gatsby that “Daisy’s embarrassed too.” Nick therefore gives Gatsby something he desperately needs: a way of imagining Daisy’s feelings from a less threatening perspective. Gatsby is trapped inside his own anxiety, while Nick temporarily becomes the person who helps him interpret reality.

Through Felski, this can be understood as a deeper form of complex identification because emotional recognition begins to influence Nick’s actions. Nick is still capable of criticizing Gatsby when he states: “you’re being rude”, so we can see that identification has not destroyed his moral independence. In fact, the scene combines criticism and care. Nick scolds Gatsby precisely because he wants him to succeed. His impatience is therefore a different from rejection: it resembles the frustration one might feel toward someone whose vulnerability one understands but whose behaviour still needs correcting.

Later on in the scene, Nick leaves the cottage for half an hour, walking outside in the rain to allow the lovers their privacy. When he returns, the rain has stopped, and Gatsby's transformation is amazing: “He literally glowed; without a word or a gesture of

exultation a new well-being radiated from him and filled the little room" (Fitzgerald 89). Nick feels an authentic, joyful empathy for Gatsby's triumph. Nick agrees to accompany them on a tour of Gatsby's immense palace, watching Gatsby display his imported English shirts, throwing linen, silk, and flannel shirts before Daisy until she buries her face in the fabrics and weeps with overwhelming emotion (Fitzgerald 92).

During this tour, Nick observes one of the most poignant moments of disillusionment in the novel: Gatsby looks across the bay toward Daisy's dock, where the green light had burned for five years as the symbol of his love for her:

> "If it wasn't for the mist we could see your home across the bay," said Gatsby. "You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of your dock." Daisy put her arm through his abruptly, but he seemed absorbed in what he had just said. Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one. (Fitzgerald 93)

Nick's observation that Gatsby's "count of enchanted objects had diminished by one" demonstrates the incredible psychological depth of his empathy. Nick understands that the reality of having Daisy physically present can never match the colossal, god-like perfection of the dream that Gatsby nursed in solitude for five years. Nick here seems to see the tragedy that awaits Gatsby even in the moment of his greatest triumph.

By actively promoting this reunion, Nick Carraway demonstrates the complete ethical consequence of complex identification lived on his own skin. Nick's traditional Midwestern morality strictly prohibits adultery. Daisy is his cousin, and Tom is his college classmate. Under conventional rules, facilitating an adulterous affair between a married mother and a criminal bootlegger is a serious moral transgression, but yet Nick willingly acts as the guardian and protector of their reunion. Nick's emotional allegiance to Gatsby's romantic dream is so powerful that it overrides his conventional ethical duties. Our narrator here experiences the reality of complex identification as a personal moral sacrifice: he chooses to become an accomplice to an affair because he believes that Gatsby's capacity for love possesses a sacred beauty that transcends the hypocritical morality of society.

The fourth scene in our exploration of complex identification in Nick Carraway takes place in Chapter Six, which Fitzgerald opens with a crucial biographical digression that strips away the final layers of Gatsby's mythology. Here, the narrator reveals the historical reality of the man: his true name was James Gatz, born in rural North Dakota to poor, shiftless, and unsuccessful farm people whom his imagination had never really accepted as his parents. At the age of seventeen, standing on the shores of Lake Superior in a torn green jersey and canvas trousers, he met Dan Cody, a fifty-year-old copper millionaire aboard his yacht, and at that moment invented the name and persona of "Jay Gatsby." Nick famously reflects on this act of supreme self-creation:

> The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God, a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that, and he must be about His Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty. So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end. (Fitzgerald 98)

This biographical revelation is essential for understanding Nick's complex identification with Jay Gatsby, in fact on the one hand, Nick recognizes that Gatsby's identity is an artificial construct dedicated to the service of a "vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty." The adjectives "vulgar" and "meretricious" demonstrate Nick's ongoing aesthetic and moral critique: Gatsby's taste was formed by the crude ambitions of a penniless adolescent seduced by the ostentatious wealth of the Gilded Age. On the other hand, Nick is captivated by Gatsby's god-like refusal to accept the limitations of his birth. To be "faithful to the end" to a self-invented ideal requires a heroic, spiritual discipline that commands Nick's deepest admiration.

However, the dangerous, destructive consequences of this self-invention become acutely visible later in the chapter, following a Saturday night party at Gatsby's mansion that is attended by Tom and Daisy Buchanan. The party is an agonizing failure, and Tom wanders through the crowd mocking the newly rich guests and declaring that he would investigate Gatsby's past, stating dismissively: "A lot of these newly rich people are just big bootleggers, you know" (Fitzgerald 107). Daisy is equally appalled: she is profoundly offended by the raw, vulgar energy of West Egg: by its loud movie stars, drunken

producers, and lack of aristocratic restraint. Daisy retreats into the cold, protective snobbery of East Egg, leaving Gatsby shattered.

When the last guests depart, Nick stays behind to walk with Gatsby on the deserted marble terrace. The physical setting which features strewn with crushed fruit rinds, torn party favors, and cigarette butts, mirrors the wreckage of Gatsby's hopes. Gatsby is overwhelmed by despair because he sensed Daisy's disgust. In the quiet darkness of the early morning, Gatsby reveals the terrifying, absolute nature of his obsession to Nick:

> He wanted nothing less of Daisy than that she should go to Tom and say: “I never loved you.” After she had obliterated three years with that sentence they could decide upon the more practical measures to be taken. One of them was that, after she was free, they were to go back to Louisville and be married from her house – just as if it were five years ago. “I wouldn't ask too much of her,” I ventured. “You can't repeat the past.” “Can't repeat the past?” he cried incredulously. “Why of course you can!” He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand. “I'm going to fix everything just the way it was before,” he said, nodding determinedly. “She'll see.” (Fitzgerald 109-110)

In this iconic dialogue, Nick confronts the darkest dimension of Gatsby's mind: he does not merely want Daisy to divorce Tom and marry him in the present. He demands the total obliteration of five years of her life. He wants Daisy to wipe out her marriage, wipe out the birth of her three year old daughter Pammy, and wipe out every emotion she has felt since 1917, so they can return to the exact moment when they first kissed in Louisville. When Nick offers the sane, mature counsel of a rational observer, “You can't repeat the past” Gatsby cries out : “Why of course you can!”

Nick sees Gatsby's terrifying delusion with absolute clarity. To believe that one can “fix everything just the way it was before” is an act of monstrous megalomania. Gatsby refuses to accept the fundamental laws of human existence: time, change, aging, and mortality. Furthermore, Gatsby treats Daisy not as an autonomous, living woman with her own motherhood and memories, but as a frozen aesthetic ideal, a prize that was stolen from him and that must be recaptured to validate his self-creation. Nick recognizes that Gatsby's desire is unnatural, tyrannical, and bound for catastrophe. Any conventional observer would be repulsed by such obsessive egocentrism.

Yet, what makes Nick's reaction so profound is what occurs immediately following this outburst. Instead of mocking Gatsby or walking away from his madness, Nick listens as Gatsby recounts the sacred, foundational memory that animates his entire being. Gatsby describes the cool autumn night in Louisville five years earlier when he walked with Daisy under the falling leaves:

> One autumn night, five years before, they had been walking down the street when the leaves were falling, and they came to a place where there were no trees and the sidewalk was white with moonlight... Out of the corner of his eye Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalks really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees – he could climb to it, if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder. His heart beat faster and faster as Daisy's white face came up to his own. He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God. So he waited, listening for a moment longer to the tuning-fork that had been struck upon a star. Then he kissed her. At his lips' touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete. (Fitzgerald 110-111)

This passage contains some of the most lyrical and philosophically complex prose in American literature. Gatsby understood that by kissing Daisy, he was performing a tragic sacrifice: he was surrendering the infinite, god like freedom of his solitary imagination in order to bind his entire destiny to the “perishable breath” of a mortal woman. Daisy became the physical incarnation of his unutterable visions of beauty and wonder. When Gatsby finishes speaking, Nick has an extraordinary, haunting reaction that reveals the deepest layer of his complex identification:

> Through all he said, even through his appalling sentimentality, I was reminded of something, an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words, that I had heard somewhere a long time ago. For a moment a phrase tried to take shape in my mouth and my lips parted like a dumb man's, as though there was more struggling upon them than a wisp of startled air. But they made no sound, and what I had almost remembered was uncommunicable forever. (Fitzgerald 111)

This moment is a perfect demonstration of how complex identification operates within the human soul. We can really notice the sharp, agonized tension between Nick's critical intellect and his affective resonance. Intellectually, Nick's Midwestern rationality remains fully active: he describes Gatsby's story as an “appalling sentimentality.” The word “appalling” shows that Nick does not endorse Gatsby's romanticism as practical or realistic; he sees its exaggerated, melodramatic excess. But existentially, Nick is completely overwhelmed. Gatsby's words awaken an ancient, forgotten memory inside Nick, “an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words”, that leaves him speechless, with his lips parted “like a dumb man's.”

That is why this passage goes beyond simple sympathy. Earlier, Nick can sympathize with Gatsby because he sees him frightened before meeting Daisy: that is relatively easy to explain: Gatsby is vulnerable, so Nick feels compassion. Here the connection is much stranger. Nick recognizes himself in Gatsby without knowing exactly what he recognizes. This is also why Gatsby’s “sentimentality” cannot simply be dismissed as foolishness. Nick knows intellectually that Gatsby’s dream is impossible, but Gatsby gives extreme expression to a desire that Nick seems to recognize within himself. Gatsby takes a common human impulse, the wish to recover something lost, and pursues it with extraordinary intensity. Nick may consider Gatsby's version excessive, but he cannot completely separate himself from the desire behind it. This passage therefore reveals an important development in Nick's complex identification. Earlier, Nick understood Gatsby's vulnerability, but here, he feels an unexplained correspondence between Gatsby's inner world and his own. His identification has moved from sympathy toward something closer to self-recognition.

Through Rita Felski's theoretical framework in *Uses of Literature*, this passage represents the purest manifestation of the modality of recognition. Felski explains that recognition is an affective shock of affinity where an observer perceives a shared human truth in another person. Nick recognizes in Gatsby's madness a universal, sacred human desire that modern society has abandoned: the longing to stop time, to preserve beauty against decay, and to commit one's life totally to a transcendent ideal, and he identifies with Gatsby's impossible dream because it represents an alternative to the spiritual emptiness of the modern world. Nick knows that Gatsby's attempt to repeat the past is crazy and doomed, but he recognizes that Gatsby's crazy devotion possesses a tragic grandeur that makes the cold, cynical realism of men like Tom Buchanan look utterly dead and sterile.

It is important for us to notice that in Felski, recognition is not simply agreement or admiration, but it is the experience of encountering something outside oneself that suddenly makes something about oneself, or about human experience, newly visible. Gatsby does this for Nick: here Nick's reaction is paradoxical, because he recognizes that Gatsby's dream is irrational and ultimately impossible, yet he also senses that the emotional impulse behind it contains something profoundly recognizable. Gatsby's desire to recover Daisy is not only a desire for a woman; Daisy here has become connected to an entire lost world: youth, possibility, beauty, hope, and the belief that life can be shaped according to one's deepest desires. When Gatsby attempts to recover Daisy, he is symbolically attempting to defeat time itself.

The fifth episode in our textual analysis occurs in the first half of Chapter Seven, which brings the novel's underlying social and sexual tensions to an explosive climax. Fitzgerald sets this confrontation on the hottest day of the summer, a day of suffocating, broiling heat that strips away the civilized pretenses of the characters and forces their repressed conflicts into the open. In a rented suite at the Plaza Hotel in Manhattan, Jay Gatsby and Tom Buchanan engage in a brutal duel for the possession of Daisy. For Nick Carraway, who sits as an eyewitness to this psychological carnage, the scene represents the agonizing moment when Gatsby's mythic dream collides violently with human reality, exposing both Gatsby's criminal savagery and his tragic fragility.

The tension begins earlier that afternoon at the Buchanan mansion in East Egg, where Gatsby encounters a physical reality that his imagination had never accounted for: Daisy's three year old daughter, Pammy. When the nurse brings the child into the room, Gatsby stares at her in stunned disbelief: “Gatsby and I in turn leaned down and took the small, reluctant hand. Afterward he kept looking at the child with surprise. I don't think he had ever really believed in its existence before” (Fitzgerald 117). Pammy's living flesh represents the undeniable proof of time, change, and Daisy's physical life with Tom. Gatsby's desire to erase the past five years is immediately exposed as an impossible fantasy.

When the group moves to the Plaza Hotel to escape the heat, Tom Buchanan launches a calculated, vicious assault on Gatsby's identity. Tom begins by mocking Gatsby's claim of having attended Oxford: “An Oxford man!... Like hell he is! He wears a pink suit” (Fitzgerald 122). When Tom directly challenges him in the hotel suite, Gatsby defends himself with surprising dignity, explaining that he attended Oxford for five months in 1919 under an educational opportunity offered to American officers after the

Armistice. Nick's reaction to this defense is intensely revealing: “I wanted to get up and slap him on the back. I had one of those renewals of complete faith in him that I'd experienced before” (Fitzgerald 129). Nick's allegiance surges whenever Gatsby demonstrates authenticity, showing how desperately Nick wants to believe in his friend.

However, Tom quickly shifts his attack from Gatsby's social pedigree to his criminal empire. Tom reveals that his private detectives have investigated Gatsby's background in Chicago, uncovering the sordid reality of his fortune:

> “I found out what your 'drug-stores' were.” He turned to us and spoke rapidly. “He and this Wolfsheim bought up over a hundred side-street drug-stores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter. That's one of his little stunts. I picked him for a bootlegger the first time I saw him, and I wasn't far wrong.” “What about it?” said Gatsby politely. “I guess your friend Walter Chase wasn't too proud to come in on it.” “And you left him in the lurch, didn't you? You let him go to jail for a month over in New Jersey... He's told me some other things too, but I'm going to make a tour of the drug-stores to make sure.” (Fitzgerald 133)

In this exchange, the glamorous veneer of Gatsby's fortune is completely stripped away. Tom exposes the gritty mechanics of bootlegging: selling raw grain alcohol through side-street pharmacies, bribing local officials, and ruthlessly abandoning partners like Walter Chase to prison when federal authorities close in. Even worse, Tom hints at a darker, unnamed racket involving stolen securities that Walter Chase was terrified to speak of. Nick is forced to look directly at the criminal machinery that paid for Gatsby's silk shirts, marble swimming pool, and hydroplanes.

Simultaneously, Gatsby attempts to force Daisy into fulfilling his absolute romantic scenario. Stepping forward, Gatsby demands: “Your wife doesn't love you... She's never loved you. She loves me” (Fitzgerald 130). When Tom fiercely denies this, Gatsby turns to Daisy and commands her to speak the fatal words: “Just tell him the truth, that you never loved him, and it's all wiped out forever” (Fitzgerald 132). But Daisy cannot sustain this emotional tyranny. Trapped between Tom's aggressive bullying and Gatsby's impossible expectations, Daisy breaks down into hysterical weeping:

> “Oh, you want too much!” she cried to Gatsby. “I love you now, isn't that enough? I can't help what's past.” She began to sob helplessly. “I did love him once, but I loved

> you too. Gatsby's eyes opened and closed. “You loved me too?” he repeated. “Even that's a lie,” said Tom savagely. “She didn't know you were alive. Why, there're things between Daisy and me that you'll never know, things that neither of us can ever forget.” The words seemed to bite physically into Gatsby. “I want to speak to Daisy alone,” he insisted. “She's all excited now” “Even alone I can't say I never loved Tom,” she admitted in a pitiful voice. “It wouldn't be true.” (Fitzgerald 132-133)

Daisy's confession “I did love him once, but I loved you too”, is the fatal blow that destroys Gatsby's universe. Gatsby's entire life was predicated on the belief that Daisy's love for him was absolute, pure, and eternal, and that her five years with Tom were a meaningless illusion. When Daisy admits that she loved Tom too, Gatsby's dream collapses into ruins. The past cannot be wiped out; human feelings cannot be rewritten like a theatrical script.

At this exact moment of defeat, Nick witnesses a terrifying physical transformation in Gatsby. As Tom ruthlessly presses his advantage, revealing further details of Gatsby's underworld rackets, the polished gentleman completely disappears, and the violent criminal emerges:

> He began to talk excitedly to Daisy, denying everything, defending his name against accusations that had not been made. But with every word she was drawing further and further into herself, so he gave that up, and only the dead dream fought on as the afternoon slipped away, trying to touch what was no longer tangible, struggling unhappily, undespairingly, toward that lost voice across the room. The voice begged again to go. “Please, Tom! I can't stand this any more.” Her frightened eyes told that whatever intentions, whatever courage she had had, were definitely gone. “You two start on home, Daisy,” said Tom. “In Mr. Gatsby's car. Go on. He won't annoy you. I think he realizes that his presumptuous little flirtation is over.” (Fitzgerald 134-135)

Nick records that Gatsby looked as if he had “killed a man”, that for a terrifying instant, the vicious underworld mobster flashed across his features, frightening Daisy so deeply that she retreated into herself forever. Tom's contemptuous gesture, ordering Daisy to drive home alone with Gatsby in Gatsby's own car, is the ultimate insult: Tom knows that Gatsby is completely broken, and that Daisy will never leave the security of old money for a disgraced bootlegger.

For Nick Carraway, this scene marks an agonizing turning point in his complex identification. As he watches “the dead dream fight on,” Nick is suddenly overwhelmed by a profound personal melancholy. He realizes that this day, August 18, 1922, is his thirtieth birthday: “Thirty, the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning brief-case of enthusiasm, thinning hair” (Fitzgerald 135). In this moment of shared mortality, Nick's identification with Gatsby deepens into tragic solidarity. Nick sees Gatsby's criminal darkness, his hubris, and his terrifying temper; yet, Nick feels an immense, sorrowful empathy for this lonely man who watched his sacred, five-year dream bleed to death in a hot hotel room, while the cynical Buchanans triumphed through the sheer weight of their wealth.

The second half of Chapter Seven contains the most morally and emotionally conflicted episode in the entire novel. Following the catastrophic confrontation at the Plaza Hotel, the narrative shifts from psychological violence to physical catastrophe. On the return drive from Manhattan to Long Island, Gatsby's yellow car strikes and kills Myrtle Wilson in the Valley of Ashes, fleeing the scene without stopping. For Nick Carraway, who arrives at the Buchanan estate shortly after witnessing Myrtle's mutilated corpse, this night becomes the supreme testing ground of his complex identification. In the dark garden of East Egg, Nick confronts the ugliest moral failure of Jay Gatsby: his total indifference to the death of a human being, only to experience a sudden and heartbreaking transition into profound and tragic allegiance.

The horrific nature of the accident cannot be overstated. As analyzed in Chapter Two of this dissertation, Myrtle Wilson's death is depicted with brutal, graphic violence: her left breast was torn open, her mouth ripped at the edges, and her vital life force extinguished in the dust of the road (Fitzgerald 137). When Nick, Tom, and Jordan arrive at Wilson's garage a few minutes later, Nick is physically sickened by the sight of Myrtle's body wrapped in a blanket on the work-table and by the demented wailing of George Wilson. Even Tom Buchanan, a man not known for emotional sensitivity, is reduced to tears as they drive away, weeping into his steering wheel: “The God damned coward!” he whimpered. “He didn't even stop his car” (Fitzgerald 141).

When they reach the Buchanan mansion in East Egg, Nick feels an overwhelming moral revulsion toward the entire group. When Jordan invites him inside to wait for a taxi and have supper, Nick flatly refuses: “I'd be damned if I'd go in; I'd had enough of all of them for one day, and that included Jordan too” (Fitzgerald 142). Nick wants nothing more than to escape this world of violence, infidelity, and carelessness. But as he walks

down the dark driveway toward the gate, he is suddenly arrested by a voice whispering from the bushes: it is Jay Gatsby, still wearing his theatrical pink suit, lurking in the shadows of the Buchanan garden like a fugitive.

What follows is one of the most chilling and ethically revealing dialogues in American literature:

> "Did you see any trouble on the road?" he asked after a minute. "Yes." He hesitated. "Was she killed?" "Yes." "I thought so; I told Daisy I thought so. It's better that the shock should come all at once. She stood it pretty well." He spoke as if Daisy's reaction was the only thing that mattered. "I got to West Egg by a side road," he went on, "and left the car in my garage. I don't think anybody saw us, but of course I can't be sure." I disliked him so much by this time that I didn't find it necessary to tell him he was wrong. "Who was the woman?" he inquired. "Her name was Wilson. Her husband owns the garage. How the devil did it happen?" "Well, I tried to swing the wheel" He broke off, and suddenly I guessed at the truth. "Was Daisy driving?" "Yes," he said after a moment, '"but of course I'll say I was." (Fitzgerald 143)

In this dialogue, Nick confronts Gatsby's absolute moral failing. Gatsby's response to Myrtle's violent death is monstrously callous. A working class woman's life has just been destroyed, but Gatsby shows no remorse, no pity, no grief, and no shock. He does not even know her name. His sole concern is that "Daisy stood it pretty well." Furthermore, Gatsby reveals that he hid the blood stained murder weapon in his garage, that he hopes nobody saw them, and that he intends to lie to the authorities by falsely claiming that he was driving the car, thereby acting as an accessory to vehicular homicide.

Nick's reaction to this moral blindness is explicit and uncompromising: "I disliked him so much by this time that I didn't find it necessary to tell him he was wrong." Here, the ethical boundary is absolute. Nick's moral conscience completely condemns Gatsby. Gatsby is behaving with criminal cowardice, covering up a fatal hit and run accident, and demonstrating a chilling indifference to human life. At this exact moment, Nick's alignment with Gatsby seems permanently broken. Any conventional moral framework would demand that Nick notify the police and terminate his relationship with this dangerous criminal.

Yet, Gatsby asks Nick to perform one final, desperate favor: to walk up to the house and check whether Tom is bothering Daisy. Nick agrees. He walks quietly across the dark

lawn and peers through the uncurtained pantry window into the kitchen. The scene Nick witnesses inside completely reverses the moral dynamics of the episode:

> Daisy and Tom were sitting opposite each other at the kitchen table, with a plate of cold fried chicken between them, and two bottles of ale. He was talking intently across the table at her, and in his earnestness his hand had fallen upon and covered her own. Once in a while she looked up at him and nodded in agreement. They weren't happy, and neither of them had touched the chicken or the ale, and yet they weren't unhappy either. There was an unmistakable air of natural intimacy about the picture, and anybody would have said that they were conspiring together. (Fitzgerald 144-145)

This silent tableau over cold fried chicken and ale is one of the most devastating scenes of social critique in modern literature. In this quiet kitchen, Tom and Daisy Buchanan close ranks. They are not grieving for Myrtle; they are not facing the moral consequences of the slaughter, but instead, they are "conspiring together." Daisy, who was behind the steering wheel and who killed Myrtle, has already made her choice: she has retreated into the impenetrable fortress of Tom's wealth, pedigree, and social immunity. The old money elite unites to protect itself, perfectly willing to let outsiders, like Myrtle Wilson, George Wilson, and Jay Gatsby, absorb the destruction and pay the blood price for their carelessness.

When Nick walks back down the driveway to where Gatsby is still hiding in the dark bushes, the emotional contrast between the two spaces is heartbreaking. Gatsby asks if there was any trouble, and Nick gently assures him: "No... It's all quiet." Gatsby declares that he will wait outside Daisy's window all night, until dawn, just in case Tom attempts to harm her. Nick knows the terrible truth: Daisy is not in danger; she is sitting warmly inside, plotting her escape with her husband. Gatsby's noble sacrifice is an illusion. The chapter closes with one of the most haunting, lyrical sentences in American fiction:

> He put his hands in his pockets and turned back eagerly to his scrutiny of the house, as though my presence marred the sacredness of the vigil. So I walked away and left him standing there in the moonlight, watching over nothing. (Fitzgerald 145)

Applying Rita Felski's theoretical lenses from *Hooked* and *Uses of Literature* to this climax demonstrates how complex identification functions at the absolute limits of moral toleration. Felski points out that identification does not require excusing or sanitizing a character's sins. Nick does not forget Gatsby's callousness toward Myrtle; he does not forgive the hit and run cover up. Yet, Nick's intense dislike is completely superseded by an overwhelming, tragic allegiance. Why? Because Nick realizes that Gatsby is a sacrificial knight guarding an empty dream, willing to lay down his life for a woman who has already betrayed him. Nick lives this complex identification as an acute psychological wound on his own skin. He experiences the total, unresolved collision between ethical judgment and affective compassion. Gatsby is standing in the moonlight "watching over nothing", guarding a dead dream, a fraudulent love, and a worthless woman.

However, for Gatsby, the vigil is full of meaning. For Nick, who possesses knowledge Gatsby does not fully accept, it is empty. Gatsby believes he is protecting Daisy and preserving their relationship; Nick increasingly understands that Daisy has already retreated into the security of her life with Tom. Gatsby therefore continues performing an act of absolute devotion after the object capable of justifying that devotion has effectively disappeared.

This is where Felski's concept of recognition can again deepen the analysis. Nick does not necessarily recognize himself in Gatsby's particular obsession with Daisy. Instead, he recognizes something larger in Gatsby's refusal to abandon meaning even when reality has destroyed its foundation. Gatsby embodies an extreme version of a recognizable human condition: continuing to invest emotionally in something after evidence suggests that it is lost. The phrase "watching over nothing" is therefore not simply mockery. If Nick merely considered Gatsby ridiculous, he could have written something like *waiting uselessly outside Daisy's house*. Instead, "nothing" transforms Gatsby's vigil into an existential image. Gatsby stands alone before an absence. The dream remains psychologically real to him even though its external reality has disappeared; this produces the painful structure of Nick's complex identification: Nick sees the nothing. Gatsby still sees the dream. Nick nevertheless feels the power of Gatsby's devotion.

This is why Nick walking away is also significant. He does not join Gatsby's vigil. There remains a boundary between them. Nick cannot fully enter Gatsby's illusion because he sees too much. In this sense, identification never becomes complete fusion.

Nick remains Nick. His critical consciousness survives, yet emotionally he cannot simply dismiss Gatsby either.

This is where complex identification reaches one of its strongest forms: proximity without sameness. Nick can stand outside Gatsby's worldview and simultaneously feel profoundly affected by it. He understands that Gatsby is mistaken while recognizing something emotionally powerful in the intensity with which Gatsby remains committed to that mistake. In that lonely vigil, Gatsby exhibits a capacity for devotion and sacrifice that makes the calculating, cowardly Buchanans look utterly corrupt and hollow. Nick cannot defend Gatsby's morality, but his heart remains forever aligned with this tragic dreamer against the callous cruelty of the world.

The final and most decisive stage of Nick Carraway's complex identification unfolds across Chapters Eight and Nine, which recount Gatsby's last hours alive, his violent death, and Nick's solitary struggle to organize his funeral. In these concluding chapters, the tension between moral disapproval and emotional allegiance reaches its absolute, explicit resolution. Fitzgerald provides the ultimate textual proof that Nick's attachment to Gatsby is not based on naive admiration or moral blindness, but on a conscious, agonizing choice of loyalty in a world that has discarded all human decency.

In Chapter Eight, on the morning following Myrtle's death, Nick goes over to Gatsby's mansion at dawn. The magnificent palace, which for months was filled with music, laughter, and hundreds of glittering celebrities, has undergone a terrifying transformation: "His gorgeous house had turned into an enormous, dusty tomb. The front door was open, and an inexplicable amount of dust lay over the furniture and carpets, while the rooms smelled musty and cold" (Fitzgerald 147-148). The spell of wealth and glamour has completely broken. Nick urges Gatsby to flee Long Island immediately: "You ought to go away... It's pretty certain they'll trace your car... Go to Atlantic City for a week, or up to Montreal" (Fitzgerald 148). Nick knows that the police and the press are closing in. But Gatsby refuses to consider running away; he clings desperately to the faint hope that Daisy might still call him.

As they share a quiet breakfast, Gatsby recounts the story of his youth in Louisville once more, speaking with an honesty he has never displayed before. He confesses that his officer's uniform had been a disguise that concealed his poverty, and that he had committed his entire soul to Daisy. When it is time for Nick to catch the morning train to his office in Wall Street, they walk together down the marble steps toward the gate. Nick misses two consecutive trains because he simply cannot bear to leave Gatsby alone.

Finally, as he reaches the end of the driveway, Nick stops, turns around, and shouts across the lawn:

> "They're a rotten crowd," I shouted across the lawn. "You're worth the whole damn bunch put together." I've always been glad I said that. It was the only compliment I ever gave him, because I disapproved of him from beginning to end. First he nodded politely, and then his face broke into that radiant and understanding smile, as if we'd been in ecstatic cahoots on that fact all the time. His gorgeous pink rag of a suit made a bright spot of color against the white steps, and I thought of the night when I first came to his dark mansion, three months before. (Fitzgerald 154)

This passage contains the single most critical sentence in the entire novel for understanding complex identification: "It was the only compliment I ever gave him, because I disapproved of him from beginning to end." Notice the uncompromising clarity of Nick's confession. Nick does not say that he disapproved of Gatsby initially and then changed his mind; he states explicitly that his moral disapproval lasted "from beginning to end." Even at the very moment he offers his supreme compliment, Nick's ethical judgment remains fully active. Nick knows that Gatsby is a bootlegger, an impostor, an associate of gangsters who fixed the World's Series, and an accomplice to a fatal hit and run manslaughter.

Yet, in the very same breath, Nick shouts that Gatsby is "worth the whole damn bunch put together." Who is the "rotten crowd"? The rotten crowd is Tom Buchanan, Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker, and the entire aristocratic class of East Egg. They are the people who possess social respectability, elite family lineage, clean legal records, and immense wealth, but who are completely rotten inside, cowardly, cynical, selfish, and incapable of genuine love. Gatsby, with all his criminal dirt and vulgarity, possesses a capacity for devotion, fidelity, and self-sacrifice that makes him infinitely superior to the people who despise him. Nick's allegiance is granted to Gatsby not because Gatsby is morally innocent, but because his romantic spirit represents a transcendent, incorruptible ideal in a debased, cynical world.

A few hours after this conversation, catastrophe strikes. George Wilson, having been told by Tom Buchanan that the yellow car belonged to Gatsby, walks across Long Island in a state of deranged grief, sneaks into Gatsby's estate, shoots Gatsby dead in his swimming pool, and then shoots himself in the grass. When Gatsby's body is discovered

floating on a pneumatic mattress in circles of blood-stained water, the entire social world that had devoured his hospitality instantly vanishes.

Chapter Nine chronicles the total, sickening abandonment of Jay Gatsby by society, and Nick's heroic, solitary defense of his memory. When Nick tries to contact Daisy to inform her of Gatsby's death, he discovers that Tom and Daisy have packed their bags and left town without leaving an address, without sending a wire, and without sending a single flower. When Nick contacts Meyer Wolfsheim, the mobster who claimed to have "made" Gatsby and loved him like a son, Wolfsheim cynically refuses to attend the funeral: "Let us learn to show our friendship for a man when he is alive and not after he is dead... When a man gets killed I never like to get mixed up in it in any way" (Fitzgerald 171-172). Even Klipspringer, the "boarder" who lived in Gatsby's mansion for months playing the piano, calls Nick only to ask if someone could mail him a pair of white tennis shoes he left in the front hall (Fitzgerald 168-169).

In the face of this total social betrayal, Nick takes total, personal responsibility for Gatsby. He writes with profound emotion:

> I found myself on Gatsby's side, and alone. From the moment the telephone rang that afternoon of his death the entire responsibility for his arrangements, and for the preservation of his name, fell upon me with a reassuring necessity. It was an unusual footing for us, for he had been a man of few confidences, but all this part of it seemed to fall naturally upon me... I wanted to get somebody for him. I wanted to go into the room where he lay and say: "I'll get somebody for you, Gatsby. Don't worry. Just trust me and I'll get somebody for you." (Fitzgerald 164-165)

The declaration "I found myself on Gatsby's side, and alone" represents the absolute culmination of complex identification lived on Nick's own skin. Nick does not take Gatsby's side out of social duty, financial reward, or ideological agreement; he takes it because his emotional allegiance has become a sacred moral duty. On the rainy afternoon of the funeral, only three people follow Gatsby's hearse to the cemetery: Nick Carraway, Gatsby's heartbroken, bewildered father Henry C. Gatz, and Owl Eyes, the drunken guest who had marveled at Gatsby's uncut books in Chapter Three. Standing in the pouring rain beside the open grave, Owl Eyes wipes his spectacles and speaks the novel's final, devastating epitaph:

> "Why, my God! they used to go there by the hundreds." He took off his glasses and wiped them again, outside and in. "The poor son of a bitch," he said. (Fitzgerald 175)

Through Rita Felski's theoretical framework in *Hooked: Art and Attachmen*t, this conclusion demonstrates how complex identification completely decouples allegiance from moral approval. Felski explains that allegiance is an act of solidarity that often forms in response to social cruelty and injustice. Nick sees that the world treated Gatsby as a commodity: they drank his champagne, danced in his gardens, spread vicious rumors about him, and then threw his dead body aside like garbage. Nick's loyalty to Gatsby is an act of profound ethical rebellion against this inhumanity. By standing alone on Gatsby's side, Nick affirms that despite all of Gatsby's crimes, lies, and moral blindness, his capacity for love and hope possessed an incorruptible dignity that deserved to be remembered, mourned, and honored.

3.4 Nick Carraway's Divided Conscience, Moral Compromises, and Complicity in the Jazz Age

To fully grasp why Nick Carraway forms such an intense and enduring complex identification with Jay Gatsby, it is essential to examine Nick's own psychological contradictions, his Midwestern social background, and his significant moral compromises throughout the novel. A common and naive misreading of *The Great Gatsby* treats Nick as an immaculate, disinterested moral judge, a pure, innocent Midwesterner who merely observes the sins of decadent Easterners with righteous disapproval. However, narrative theorists such as Wayne C. Booth and feminist critics such as Judith Fetterley have thoroughly demolished this simplistic assumption (Booth 155; Fetterley 72). Nick's capacity to empathize with and protect Gatsby's compromised existence is directly rooted in the fact that Nick's own moral conscience is profoundly divided, and that Nick himself actively participates in the moral compromises of the Jazz Age.

Nick introduces himself as the product of conservative, established Midwestern privilege. His family has been prominent in their city for three generations, cultivating a comfortable myth of descent from the aristocratic Dukes of Buccleuch, though their actual fortune originated in the hard commercial reality of a wholesale hardware business

founded by his grandfather's brother during the Civil War. Educated at Yale and having experienced the mechanized slaughter of World War I in France, Nick returns home to the Midwest feeling profoundly restless. In the spring of 1922, he decides to move east to New York to enter the financial world of Wall Street, seeking personal independence and social excitement. He arrives with the moral maxims of his father ringing in his ears, specifically the paternal advice that "reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope" (Fitzgerald 1). At the close of Chapter Three, following an extended description of Gatsby's lavish party and his developing romance with Jordan Baker, Nick makes his most famous, proud, and deeply ironic assertion:

> Every one suspects himself of at least one of the cardinal virtues, and this is mine: I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known. (Fitzgerald 59)

In *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1983), Wayne C. Booth analyzes this specific declaration as a masterclass in narrative irony. When a first-person narrator explicitly congratulates himself on possessing one of the "cardinal virtues", proclaiming that he is virtually unique in his honesty, the critical reader is alerted to the presence of profound psychological self deception (Booth 158). Booth demonstrates that dramatized narrators who loudly insist on their impartiality are often using that rhetoric to mask their own moral evasions. When we subject Nick's actual conduct to careful scrutiny, we discover that his claim of absolute honesty is consistently undermined by his actions, his silences, and his romantic attachments, in fact Nick's moral compromises unfold across four primary narrative domains.

First, in Chapter Two, Nick participates directly in the sordid, adulterous party at the secret Manhattan apartment Tom Buchanan maintains for Myrtle Wilson. Although Nick attempts to excuse himself by claiming that he was drunk for only the second time in his life, the text reveals that he remains in the crowded apartment for hours, drinking whiskey, observing Tom's blatant betrayal of Daisy, and socializing with Myrtle's vulgar acquaintances. When Tom becomes enraged and brutally breaks Myrtle's nose with an open handed slap, Nick does not protest, does not comfort the bleeding woman, and does not sever his relationship with Tom. Instead, Nick slips out into the hallway and ends the night in an ambiguous, intimate encounter with Mr. McKee, a pale photographer, at the Pennsylvania Station at four in the morning (Fitzgerald 37-38). Nick partakes of the

decadence while hypocritically maintaining the internal posture of a superior moral spectator.

Second, Nick enters into a sustained romantic and sexual relationship with Jordan Baker, despite being fully aware of her deep, incurable dishonesty. In Chapter Three, Nick recalls the national sports scandal in which Jordan was accused of cheating in her first major golf tournament by moving her ball from an unfavorable lie in the rough. When the scandal was hushed up by intimidated caddies and chivalrous male officials, Jordan's dishonesty became her defining trait. Nick reflects with astonishing moral flexibility: “She was incurably dishonest... Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply, I was casually sorry, and then I forgot” (Fitzgerald 58). Furthermore, in a celebrated exchange during a car ride in Chapter Three, Jordan articulates a philosophy of reckless carelessness that directly implicates Nick:

> “You're a rotten driver,” I protested. “Either you ought to be more careful, or you oughtn't to drive at all.” “I am careful.” “No, you're not.” “Well, other people are,” she said lightly. “What's that got to do with it?” “They'll keep out of my way,” she insisted. “It takes two to make an accident.” “Suppose you met somebody just as careless as yourself.” “I hope I never will,” she answered. “I hate careless people. That's why I like you.” (Fitzgerald 58-59)

Jordan's confession, “I hate careless people. That's why I like you”, exposes the secret complicity at the heart of their relationship. Jordan recognizes that Nick functions as a protective moral buffer: his cautious, Midwestern restraint allows her to be reckless without paying the price. Nick tolerates Jordan's dishonesty because her aristocratic, cool elegance flatters his ego and grants him entry into the fashionable world of high society. Moreover, Nick conveniently forgets a young woman back home in the Midwest to whom he was tacitly engaged, playing with Jordan's affections while dodging any clear commitment. Nick's supposed honesty is revealed to be a convenient fiction.

Third, in Chapter Five, Nick actively facilitates the adulterous reunion between Jay Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan. As Daisy's second cousin and Tom's Yale classmate, Nick owes an ethical obligation of loyalty to his family. Yet Nick willingly transforms his home into an assignation house, arranges the secret meeting, guards the door while the lovers reunite, and conceals the affair from Tom throughout the summer. Nick chooses to

become an active conspirator in an adulterous betrayal, subordinating traditional familial and marital ethics to Gatsby's romantic obsession.

Fourth, in Chapter Seven, following the violent death of Myrtle Wilson, Nick conceals his direct knowledge of the hit and run accident. Nick knows that Daisy was driving the yellow car and that Gatsby is hiding the vehicle in his garage to protect her. Yet Nick never reports this information to the police, to the district attorney, or to the grieving George Wilson. By remaining silent, Nick becomes an accessory after the fact to vehicular manslaughter, protecting the wealthy perpetrators while the working-class victim lies dead in the morgue.

These pervasive moral compromises demonstrate that Nick Carraway is not an immaculate observer judging sinners from a pedestal of purity. He is deeply entangled in the moral mud of the Jazz Age. Nick is "within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled" (Fitzgerald 35). He is seduced by the speed, the illicit liquor, the easy money, and the erotic freedom of New York, even as his Midwestern conscience torments him with guilt. This divided consciousness is the exact psychological soil from which complex identification grows. Nick does not identify with Jay Gatsby from a position of unblemished righteousness; he identifies with him because he recognizes that Gatsby, like himself, is an outsider who has compromised his integrity in the pursuit of an intoxicating dream. Nick forgives Gatsby's lies because Nick lives with his own deceptions. In Gatsby, Nick sees his own secret longings for beauty, romance, and grandeur reflected and magnified on an epic scale, transforming his bond with Gatsby into a deeply personal struggle for spiritual salvation.

3.5 The Double Consciousness of the Narrator: Experiencing Self vs. Narrating Self and the Retrospective Architecture

To achieve a rigorous narratological understanding of how complex identification is constructed and communicated in *The Great Gatsby*, it is indispensable to analyze the temporal and psychological split within the narrative voice. Modern narrative theory, exemplified by Franz Stanzel in *A Theory of Narrative* (1984), Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse* (1980), and Paul Ricoeur in *Time and Narrativ*e (1984), establishes a fundamental distinction between two functional dimensions of a first person homodiegetic narrator: the "experiencing self" (the character engaged in the ongoing events of the story world in real time) and the "narrating self" (the retrospective consciousness looking back from a position of temporal and emotional distance to select,

interpret, and arrange those events). In Fitzgerald's novel, this dual consciousness is the structural engine that enables complex identification to operate both as Nick's lived reality and as the reader's interpretive journey.

Nick the experiencing self lived through the turbulent summer of 1922 as a twenty nine year old bond salesman seeking excitement and fortune in the financial capital of the nation. At that time, Nick was physically immersed in the unfolding drama, lacking any foreknowledge of its tragic outcome. He did not know that Gatsby's parties would collapse into violence; he did not know that Myrtle Wilson would be brutally slaughtered on the road; he did not know that Daisy would retreat into callous domesticity over cold fried chicken; and he did not know that George Wilson would turn Gatsby's swimming pool into a pool of blood. Nick the experiencing self lived each revelation as an immediate, visceral shock, swinging constantly between moral outrage, social ambition, fascination, and confusion. He experienced the contradictory pulls of complex identification directly on his own skin, wrestling daily with the painful friction between his conservative Midwestern training and the transgressive allure of Gatsby's romantic world.

Conversely, the written artifact that constitutes the novel is composed by Nick the narrating self in the autumn and winter of 1924, two full years after Gatsby's death, following Nick's definitive retreat from the East back to his Midwestern hometown. This temporal distance is of paramount importance. In the opening pages of Chapter One, Nick the narrating self explicitly articulates the profound psychological trauma that drove him away from New York and shaped his retrospective writing:

> When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart. Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction. Gatsby, who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn. If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life... No, Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men. (Fitzgerald 2)

This opening frame establishes that the entire novel is an act of retrospective mourning, ethical reckoning, and mythic rehabilitation. When Nick writes that he wanted the world to be "in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever," he reveals the deep psychic exhaustion produced by the moral chaos of the East. Yet Gatsby alone is "exempt" from this universal disgust. The narrating self has already performed the ethical work of separating Gatsby from the "foul dust" that preyed upon him, the parasitic party guests, the corrupt underworld of Wolfsheim, and the careless brutality of Tom and Daisy. Nick the writer organizes his narrative precisely to justify this exemption to the reader.

In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne C. Booth emphasizes that a retrospective narrator exercises immense power through the strategic distribution of information, the pacing of disclosures, and the emotional modulation of tone (Booth 158). When we analyze the architecture of *The Great Gatsby*, we discover that Nick the narrating self deliberately structures his memoir so that the reader is forced to replicate the exact trajectory of complex identification that he experienced as the experiencing self. In fact, we can notice a meticulous progression of this narrative design:

In the first place in Chapters One through Three, Nick withholds Gatsby's physical presence and true identity, filtering him through wild rumors, distant nocturnal silhouettes, and the symbolic riddle of the green light. The reader is invited to share Nick's initial state of intrigued skepticism, viewing Gatsby as an enigmatic theatrical spectacle.

Then, in Chapter Four, Nick deliberately forces the reader to confront Gatsby's dark criminality before revealing his romantic justification. Nick places the clumsy lies about Oxford and the grotesque luncheon with Meyer Wolfsheim and his human teeth cufflinks in the foreground. The reader experiences the exact same moral repulsion and ironic amusement that Nick felt in the car.

Immediately following this exposure of corruption, Nick introduces Jordan Baker's narrative of the Louisville romance, delivering the revelation that transforms the entire moral landscape: Gatsby bought the house solely to be across the bay from Daisy. The reader experiences the same affective revolution as Nick: "He came alive to me, delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendor" (Fitzgerald 78).

Consequently, in Chapters Five and Six, Nick highlights Gatsby's extreme vulnerability, his trembling hands, his defunct clock, his childlike panic, and contrasts it with his poetic memory of the Louisville kiss, guiding the reader into deep modalities of empathy and recognition.

Finally, in Chapters Seven through Nine, Nick dramatizes the shattering of the illusion at the Plaza Hotel, the hit-and-run tragedy, and his own solitary stand at the funeral, bringing the reader to endorse his defiant conclusion that Gatsby was "worth the whole damn bunch put together" (Fitzgerald 154).

Through this retrospective architecture, Nick transforms his personal, lived trauma into a universal aesthetic and ethical experience. As Rita Felski demonstrates in *Uses of Literature* (2008), the aesthetic power of narrative lies in its ability to create "attachment through estrangement", challenging our conventional moral boundaries by making us care deeply about figures who violate societal rules (Felski, Uses of Literature 38). Nick becomes the reader's affective guide: through his dual consciousness, we learn how to look unflinchingly at a man who is an underworld bootlegger, an impostor, and an obsessive stalker, and yet recognize the transcendent, tragic majesty of his romantic faith.

In the sublime concluding passage of the novel, Nick the narrating self sits alone on the deserted shore of Long Island, looking across the dark sound where the Dutch sailors first encountered the "fresh, green breast of the new world," and connects Gatsby's personal tragedy to the universal striving of all humanity:

> Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter, tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther... And one fine morning. So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (Fitzgerald 180)

In these final sentences, Nick's complex identification reaches its ultimate poetic apotheosis. Jay Gatsby ceases to be merely James Gatz, the dead bootlegger from North Dakota; he becomes an immortal archetype of the human condition. Through the power of Nick's retrospective art, Gatsby's absurd, corrupt, and tragic striving is redeemed, standing as an eternal symbol of humanity's indomitable capacity to hope, to dream, and to beat on against the relentless currents of time.

3.6 Theoretical Synthesis: Felski, Ricoeur, and the Ethics of Ambivalence in Modernist Fiction

To fully articulate the broader hermeneutic value of our analysis, it is essential to situate Rita Felski's model of complex identification within an extended philosophical, critical,

and narrative dialogue. The dynamic of complex identification is not merely an isolated psychological quirk of Nick Carraway; rather, it constitutes the defining aesthetic and ethical breakthrough of literary modernism. By examining how Felski's concepts intersect with Paul Ricoeur's narrative ethics, Hans Robert Jauss's reception aesthetics, Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic theory, and feminist critiques of the novel, we can elucidate why Nick's ambivalent attachment to Jay Gatsby continues to resonate as one of the supreme achievements of twentieth century American literature.

In *Oneself as Another* (1992), the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur establishes that narrative literature functions as an "ethical laboratory" in which human beings test the boundaries of moral judgment and selfhood through imaginative variation (Ricoeur 115). Ricoeur draws a fundamental philosophical distinction between two core dimensions of identity: idem-identity (numerical sameness, unchanging physical characteristics, objective social roles) and ipse-identity (selfhood, moral agency, dynamic fidelity over time through narrative commitment). Ricoeur argues that a truly mature ethical life does not consist of a mechanical adherence to abstract moral rules (deontology), but of navigating the complex, painful gap between idem and ipse.

When applied to *The Great Gatsby*, Ricoeur's philosophical framework provides an extraordinary explanation for Nick's complex identification. If we judge Jay Gatsby strictly through the lens of idem-identity, his profile is deeply and irredeemably corrupted: he is James Gatz, a reckless bootlegger, an associate of gangsters who fixed the World's Series, an accomplice to a fatal hit-and-run manslaughter, and a fraudulent impostor who invents ridiculous lies about Oxford and Montenegro. If Nick's attachment were determined by idem-identity, Nick would be ethically obligated to condemn him completely. However, Gatsby's ipse-identity, so his absolute, incorruptible commitment to his dream of love, his refusal to abandon Daisy even when threatened with prison or death, and his heroic loyalty to an aesthetic ideal, possesses an extraordinary spiritual constancy. Nick's complex identification operates precisely in the space between idem and ipse. Nick separates Gatsby's criminal acts from his transcendent selfhood, recognizing that human dignity cannot be reduced to a legal balance sheet, but must be evaluated through the soul's capacity for fidelity, devotion, and hope.

Furthermore, this ethical dynamic connects directly to Hans Robert Jauss's historical reception theory in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982). Jauss mapped out five historical levels of readerly identification: the first one is associative identification, where we can distinguish a playful, collective immersion in mythic rituals; in the second

place we have admiring identification, where we see the uncritical hero worship of an idealized, flawless protagonist. Following, we find sympathetic identification, which is consituted by compassionate solidarity with a suffering, vulnerable innocent. In the fourth position we find cathartic identification: a tragic pity and fear elicited by an imperfect protagonist who suffers a downfall, and finally, ironic identification: a critical detachment, intellectual estrangement, and moral skepticism toward a problematic figure (Jauss 152).

Jauss demonstrated that while classical tragedy elicited catharsis and nineteenth-century melodrama solicited uncritical admiration or simple sympathy, modern twentieth-entury literature deliberately shatters the reader's horizon of expectations by forging an unprecedented synthesis of cathartic and ironic identification. This synthesis is precisely what Rita Felski articulates as complex identification. In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway, and through him the reader, is never permitted the comfort of pure admiration or uncritical sympathy. Nick's identification with Gatsby is continuously subjected to ironic scrutiny, skepticism, and moral critique. Nick laughs at Gatsby's "sawdust" stories, scolds his childlike panic, and feels visceral dislike for his indifference to Myrtle's slaughter. Yet, this irony does not destroy emotional attachment; rather, it deepens it into tragic reverence. We mourn Gatsby's death with profound cathartic grief precisely because we are fully conscious of the corruption, hubris, and delusions that brought about his destruction.

In addition, the dialogic theory of Mikhail Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981) offers a crucial sociopolitical dimension to our understanding of Nick's ambivalence. Bakhtin argues that the novel is inherently a site of "heteroglossia", the collision and struggle of competing social voices, class ideologies, and cultural values. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald stages a fierce class war between the monologic, entrenched power of established aristocracy (represented by Tom Buchanan's East Egg, with its white supremacist doctrines, polo ponies, and inherited millions) and the carnivalesque, transgressive energy of the newly rich outsider (represented by Gatsby's West Egg). Gatsby's life is the ultimate carnivalesque inversion: a poor farm boy uses the illicit profits of Prohibition to construct a fairy-tale castle that eclipses the ancestral estates of the ruling elite.

Nick Carraway's consciousness represents the human conscience caught between these two warring worlds. As cultural historian Sarah Churchwell demonstrates in *Careless People* (2013), the fundamental tragedy of the Jazz Age was not the prevalence

of illegal bootlegging or wild parties, but the brutal reality that America's entrenched class system ruthlessly sacrificed the vulnerable, the strivers, and the working class victims, such as Myrtle, George, and Gatsby, to preserve the immunity of the careless rich (Churchwell 185). Tom and Daisy smash up things and creatures and retreat into their money, leaving others to clean up the mess. When Nick shouts that Gatsby is "worth the whole damn bunch put together," his complex identification functions as an act of subversive social justice: it rejects the cold, aristocratic cruelty of East Egg and affirms the tragic humanity of the self-made outsider.

This sociopolitical dynamic is further illuminated by feminist scholarship. In *The Resisting Reader* (1978), Judith Fetterley offers a critical analysis of the gendered politics of Nick's allegiance. Fetterley demonstrates that Nick displays a noticeable double standard: while he judges Daisy Buchanan harshly for her superficiality and condemns Jordan Baker for her dishonesty, he forgives Gatsby for far worse crimes, including bootlegging, fraud, and covering up manslaughter (Fetterley 72). Fetterley's critique does not invalidate Nick's complex identification; rather, it underscores its intensely personal, non objective character. Nick's allegiance to Gatsby is not an exercise in abstract fairness; it is an emotional, romantic brotherhood. Nick identifies with Gatsby's masculine dream of self-creation, choosing to see Daisy not as an independent victim of male rivalry, but as the fragile vessel of Gatsby's unutterable vision.

Finally, this theoretical synthesis brings us back to Rita Felski's central thesis in *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (2020). Felski insists that literary studies must move beyond the "hermeneutics of suspicion", the obsessive critical practice of treating texts solely as symptoms of ideological deception or political guilt. Felski calls for a postcritical ethos that acknowledges the reality and ethical validity of human attachment. Complex identification proves that we can love a literary figure without being blind to their flaws, and that we can critique their social sins without surrendering our capacity for compassion. Through Nick Carraway's lived struggle with Jay Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald created the ultimate monument to this postcritical truth: showing that literature's highest purpose is to teach us how to care for flawed, divided, and tragic human beings in an imperfect world.

3.7 Conclusion: The Enduring Power of Complex Identification

The overarching objective of this third chapter has been to demonstrate that the concept of complex identification is not merely an abstract, external theory developed by

contemporary academic critics, but the living, emotional, and psychological core of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*. By redirecting our analytical gaze from the external reader to the internal narrator, we have established that Nick Carraway experiences complex identification directly on his own skin throughout the course of his summer on Long Island. Nick is not a neutral, disembodied recording device; he is a morally trained Midwesterner who is thrust into a dizzying world of modern wealth, glamour, and corruption, and who must navigate his profound, contradictory attachment to the tragic figure of Jay Gatsby.

Through our rigorous, scene by scene textual analysis of seven pivotal episodes across the novel, we have traced the step by step evolution of this internal drama

Rita Felski's theoretical framework in *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (2020) and *Uses of Literatur*e (2008) provides the indispensable key to unlocking this narrative journey. Felski's revolutionary insight, that identification is not synonymous with liking or moral approval, but can be underwritten by conflicting, diverse, and ambivalent affects, allows us to understand why Nick's bond with Gatsby is so emotionally moving and ethically profound. Nick does not turn a blind eye to Gatsby's crimes. He sees the bootlegging, the lies, the transactional bribery, the megalomania, and the moral blindness. But through the modalities of recognition and empathy, Nick's emotional allegiance becomes completely detached from conventional moral deference. Nick recognizes that Gatsby's capacity for hope, his loyalty to a transcendent vision, and his willingness to sacrifice everything for love elevate him infinitely above the cold, careless cruelty of the respectable rich.

This conclusion allows us to bring the three chapters of this dissertation into a unified, coherent synthesis:

In Chapter One, “The Debate on Character”, I laid the theoretical foundations by reviewing the controversy surrounding character in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary theory, demonstrating how contemporary postcritical, affective, and cognitive theories have successfully challenged formalist skepticism and reclaimed character as an indispensable category of human experience.

In Chapter Two, “Complex Identification and Moral Ambiguity: The Case Study of Myrtle Wilson”, I explored how complex identification operates in relation to a socially marginalized, morally ambiguous figure, demonstrating that Myrtle's raw physical vitality and tragic striving command an ambivalent solidarity that cuts across class boundaries.

Finally, in Chapter Three, “The Architecture of Ambivalence: Nick Carraway, Jay Gatsby, and the Lived Experience of Complex Identification”, I have shown how complex identification functions from the inside out, dramatized through the divided consciousness of the narrator himself. Nick Carraway's experience with Jay Gatsby proves that complex identification is the very engine of literary modernism, exposing the fundamental gap between social morality and human authenticity.

Ultimately, *The Great Gatsby* endures as a masterpiece of world literature precisely because it refuses simple moral comfort. It does not present us with spotless heroes to be worshipped or black and white villains to be condemned. Instead, through Nick Carraway's lived experience of complex identification with Jay Gatsby, Fitzgerald teaches us that human relationships are inherently messy, ambivalent, and contradictory. We learn that it is possible to look clearly at a person's deepest flaws, to disapprove of their actions from an ethical standpoint, and yet to honor their humanity, support their vulnerability, and mourn their tragic loss. In a modern world that is so often quick to judge, condemn, and discard, the story of Nick and Gatsby remains a timeless testament to the power of empathy, the fragility of wonder, and the enduring mystery of the human heart.

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Dichiarazione del ricorso a strumenti di Intelligenza Artificiale (IA)

Il/La sottoscritto/a Alessia Scolaro, matricola numero 876384, iscritto/a presso Ca' Foscari al corso di Laurea magistrale in Lingue e Letterature Europee, Americane Postcoloniali, autrice dell'elaborato finale/tesi di laurea Character and Ambivalent Identification: A Reading of *The Great Gatsby*, relatrice Filomena Mitrano, consapevole delle sanzioni previste dall'art. 76 del Testo unico, D.P.R. 28/12/2000 n.445, e della decadenza dei benefici prevista dall'art. 75 del medesimo Testo unico in caso di dichiarazioni false o mendaci, sotto la propria personale responsabilità ai sensi degli artt. 46 e 47 del D.P.R. 28/12/2000 n. 445, DICHIARA di aver fatto ricorso a tecnologie di intelligenza artificiale generativa per supportare vari aspetti della ricerca e della scrittura

del suo elaborato finale/della mia tesi di laurea, in particolare per revisione e ottimizzazione dei testi per migliorare chiarezza e coerenza, supporto alla scrittura. Strumenti ultilizzati: Chat GPT e Gemini. DICHIARA INOLTRE che tutto il materiale generato dall'IA è stato attentamente verificato, rivisto e rielaborato dall'autrice, che si assume la piena responsabilità per la qualità, l'accuratezza e l'integrità scientifica del lavoro.

Conclusion

For much of the twentieth century, the study of character remained marginal in literary criticism. Dominated by Russian Formalism, New Criticism, and French Structuralism, scholarship reduced fictional figures to syntactic functions or textual assemblages within an autonomous verbal artifact. Theorists from Roman Jakobson to Roland Barthes treated interiority and empathy as naive critical taboos. This dissertation has challenged that formalist orthodoxy, embracing the contemporary postcritical and cognitive turn led by Toril Moi, Blakey Vermeule, Lisa Zunshine, and Rita Felski. Reclaiming reading as an affective practice attuned to social cognition, this study has developed the hermeneutic model of complex identification. Through an analysis of The Great Gatsby, this work demonstrates that the novel's enduring power resides in an architecture of ambivalence, in which narrative form and readerly attachment pull in conflicting directions.

The theoretical foundation articulated in Chapter One established that identification is neither a monolithic phenomenon nor a synonym for moral approval. Drawing on Rita Felski's Uses of Literature and Hooked: Art and Attachment, this study deconstructed attachment into four distinct modalities: structural alignment, moral allegiance, existential recognition, and affective empathy. The central insight of this

taxonomy is Felski's principle that "to be like a character is not synonymous with liking a character", that identification operates on the "rough ground of resemblance" rather than total fusion. Complex identification emerges when these modalities collide. When a narrative provides cognitive alignment with an ethically compromised figure or evokes empathy while fracturing moral allegiance, readers experience acute interpretive ambivalence, cultivating ethical consciousness through the lived experience of narrative tension.

Chapter Two grounded this framework in an in-depth case study of Myrtle Wilson, demonstrating how complex identification operates toward a socially marginalized figure. Traditionally dismissed as an emblem of crude vulgarity, Myrtle is denied direct interior alignment, focalized through Nick Carraway's class-conscious lens and Tom Buchanan's predatory dominance. Yet, through Felski's lenses of recognition and empathy, Myrtle commands an intense, ambivalent solidarity. Her bodily vitality and performance in the Manhattan apartment articulate a desperate refusal of social erasure within the Valley of Ashes. While readers condemn her material pretension, they recognize her poignant yearning for self-transformation. Contrasted with George Wilson's passivity and Tom Buchanan's callous entitlement, Myrtle's sacrificial death exposes Jazz Age class violence, confirming that complex identification responds to the tragic vulnerability of human striving.

Moving from external reception to intradiegetic consciousness, Chapter Three revealed that complex identification is also the internal psychological engine of the novel, dramatized through Nick Carraway. Applying Franz Stanzel's and Gérard Genette's distinction between the experiencing self and the narrating self, this study examined Nick's retrospective mediation of his bond with Jay Gatsby. Nick unflinchingly registers Gatsby's underworld ties with Meyer Wolfsheim, his fabricated pedigree, and his delusional obsession with repeating the past. Nevertheless, as the narrative progresses toward the fatal hit-and-run, Nick's bourgeois moral disapproval is superseded by an enduring affective allegiance. When Nick defiantly declares that Gatsby is "worth the whole damn bunch put together," he enacts the ultimate triumph of complex identification: severing emotional solidarity from moral judgment and affirming Gatsby's tragic humanity over the careless cruelty of East Egg.

Situating this dynamic within wider sociopolitical debates underscores the profound ethical stakes of Fitzgerald's narrative. Integrating the perspectives of Sarah Churchwell and Judith Fetterley with Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity, this

thesis has shown that complex identification serves as an incisive instrument of cultural critique. It exposes how the Jazz Age sacrificed dreamers and outsiders to preserve hereditary privilege. Concurrently, the framework interrogates Nick's own moral compromises, hypocrisies, and gendered double standards in exonerating Gatsby while judging Daisy and Jordan Baker. In doing so, this study validates Rita Felski's call to move beyond the "hermeneutics of suspicion." Complex identification demonstrates that literary criticism can embrace a postcritical ethos that critiques sociopolitical failings while preserving an authentic capacity for empathy.

Ultimately, *The Great Gatsby* endures as a masterpiece of world literature because it refuses the solace of simplistic moral comfort. The novel presents neither immaculate saints to emulate nor grotesque villains to dismiss; instead, it plunges the reader into the turbulent contradictions of human connection. Through the prism of complex identification, reading becomes an active, transformative encounter with imperfection. Fitzgerald demonstrates that it is possible to perceive a person's profound moral compromises, to reject their ethical choices, and yet to remain deeply moved by their romantic longing, vulnerability, and tragic dignity. In an age often dominated by hasty condemnation, the ambivalent attachment binding Nick, Gatsby, Myrtle, and the reader remains a timeless humanist monument. It affirms literature's highest purpose: expanding our moral imagination by teaching us to inhabit the fragile, conflicted, and enduring mystery of the human heart.