



The Technological Diegesis in *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract

This paper explores the technological diegesis in *The Great Gatsby*. In the novel, Fitzgerald cleverly integrates the technological forces into his writing. He particularly relies on the two main props of automobile and telephone to arrange his fragmented plots into a whole. By the deliberate juxtaposition of men and women and machines and repeated appeal to the automobile as both carrier and destroyer and the telephone as both communicator and informer, the technological diegesis in the novel is fully established. Moreover, the technological forces in this particular novel are metaphorically constructed into the whole discourse of it.

Keywords: Technological diegesis, Automobile, Telephone, Metaphor

The Great Gatsby is a quintessential twentieth-century novel fraught with “the constant flicker” of the American scene. Nick Carraway the narrator, coming from the Middle West and selling bonds in New York, step by step unravels the story of his neighbor Jay Gatsby, “whose mansion and fabulous entertainment are financed by bootlegging and other criminal activities (Hart & Leininger, 2005, p. 256).” On one hand, the protagonist Gatsby’s pursuit of an American Dream in the Roaring Twenties is wrapped up in the interrupted narration of the narrator Nick Carraway; on the other hand, the author’s mixed feeling of a marvel on and a dread for the new contrivances in science and technology is voiced by this same narrator as an omniscient observer of the fast developing world around him. Two parallel lines form on the same plot, yet the latter one and its relations with the former are often neglected by critics. Though the exceptional Guy Reynolds (1993, pp. v-xix) notes the mechanical forces in the novel, his concern about their contribution to the author’s fascination with American modernity fails to reveal the narratological unity underlying the two lines. In fact, the author has made the technological forces an integral part of the narration than fix them as a backdrop of it. The modern machines that undo as much as make the protagonists play a crucial role in linking everything in the story. With events and functions (characters) likened to or fixed into the discourse against the backdrop of modern machines, the whole novel forms a technological diegesis that has never before perceived in the previous American novels. Moreover, the technological forces in this particular novel are metaphorically constructed into the whole discourse of it.

The concept of diegesis here employed dates back to the distinction Plato makes between mimesis and diegesis (Harland, 2005, pp. 6-7). By technological diegesis we mean the diegesis as a narration of doings and sayings in *The Great Gatsby* is technologically conscious. First, the features of a new century are laid bare in the purposeful juxtaposition of “men and women and machines (Fitzgerald, 1993, p.37)” by the narrator Nick Carraway strolling the New York streets at night. Here in the danger of juxtaposition lies the author’s suspicious intention to materialize human beings. The comparison of Gatsby’s “heightened sensitivity to the promises of life (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 3)” to “one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 3)” may reinforce this impression on a reader of the novel. And then in Chapter Two, the narrator perceives “a machine in the kitchen which could extract the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour if a little button was pressed two hundred times by a butler’s thumb (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 26)”. For twice, the author, for a purpose of aggravating the tension between humans and machines, withholds from the reader the superordinate words, i. e. “seismograph” and “juice extractor” that the author might have safely known. We are immediately alienated by a modern gadget when we marvel at a modern gadget, especially something whose name is even unknown to us. By the way, the destructive force of machines is to some extent trapped in the machine-gun forces Carraway and Gatsby have respectively commanded in the First World War.

The conflict between humans and machines in *The Great Gatsby* is mainly embodied in the narrator’s dread for a car that claims the lives of us and the urgency on a prompt answer to the ringing telephone. The two modern technological contrivances meet the requirement of a diegesis to place a story in a certain time and space or a time-space conglomeration. In the narration of *The Great Gatsby*, the automobile and telephone as two means of communications,

on one hand, contribute to the breaking down of space barrier; on the other hand bring with them the fragmentation of space experiences of human beings in modern times. The narrator in the story is constantly weighed down by the dread for a car accident, which is to finally bring the destruction of all protagonists, Gatsby and Mr. and Mrs. Wilson physically and Tom and Daisy spiritually. In the meanwhile, the story is constantly interrupted by the telephone that Gatsby has to answer and finally betrays his criminality. Moreover, “the narrative temporality that usually concerns order, duration and frequency of time (Martin, 2006, pp. 123-125)” in the story is also shaped by the two modern machines. Their technological forces can be exemplified by the frequencies of the telephones and automobile and related words appearing in the novel. To a novel of less than 50,000 words, the following frequencies are rather provoking to the eyes of a reader. See Table 1 for concrete figures.

Thus the diegesis of *The Great Gatsby* seems to be strongly structured on two communications tools, with their vehicle properties projected onto a machine-alienated society. The telephone that constantly fragments the narration and the automobile that stubbornly brings all to a certain place both serve the purpose of patching the piecemealed plots into one for the meticulous reader. With this literary technique of high modernity, the demand on the reader of Fitzgerald is raised to a level of conscientiousness. The narrator is no longer that type of Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights*. With Dick Carraway constantly taking the same car with the protagonists and finally “intercepting” a phone call informing him the criminality of Gatsby, the narrator has been perfectly arranged to know enough to tell the story by the author who superficially tries to hide some information from the reader at first.

In fact, the story in *The Great Gatsby* is essentially made possible by the explicit dichotomy between bad driver and good driver. This distinction determines the fate of two relationships, that between Gatsby and Daisy and that between Nick and Mona Baker. And the two dialogues between Mona Baker and Dick Carraway winds up the story about Gatsby from outside. Ironically, Gatsby as a good driver eventually shoulders the responsibility for a thankless bad driver that gets scot-free for her “misdemeanor”. With both the climax and ending of the story tied to a car accident, the distinction plays a crucial role in moralizing the narration of Nick Carraway. Here the morality of the two dialogues is projected onto the story about Gatsby and Daisy and that about Carraway and Baker. Gatsby as the scapegoat for a bad driver coincides with the permanent theme of redemption in the English literature. Baker’s insistence that “It takes two to make an accident (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 39)” turns out to be futile in her courtship to the narrator, for he has come to understand, “I’m five years too old to lie to myself and call it honor (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 113).”

With a girl (Mona Baker) whose name comprised of two car brands, the automobile is also cunningly constructed by Fitzgerald into the metaphorical discourse of the novel. And the girl whom the narrator half loves further hints at the uncontrollability of a bad driver. Tom is such a careless driver. “A week after I left Santa Barbara Tom ran into a wagon on the Ventura road one night, and ripped a front wheel off his car (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 50).” But he, together with his wife, never thinks of answering for what they have done. Just in one stroke of an accident, the hypocrisy of both Tom and Daisy is wholly unmasked to the public.

Though an earlier invention, the automobile has not been widely affordable until after the 1900s with the introduction of mass-production. Now when the narrator arrives in New York, the automobile becomes a must to a member from his class and above though he just owns a second-hand Dodge. All the protagonists in *The Great Gatsby* obtain the facility of driving a car or taking a taxi. The horse-drawn wagon has now been completely replaced by the automobile. But there arises the danger of driving a car with so many new drivers on the road. This phenomenon of the automobile as the carrier and destroyer that has been the concern of many people also arouses the interest of a novelist keen on observing the world and literary innovations. By repeatedly reporting a car accident, the author in his novel gradually aggravates the catastrophic atmosphere of the whole story and complicates the conceptualization of car as the carrier and destroyer. Here are some examples. “In the ditch beside the road, right side up, but violently shorn of one wheel, rested a new coupe which had left Gatsby’s drive not two minutes before (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 36).” The scene of a man defending himself for the accident caused by the real driver recapitulates and hints at the story of Gatsby shouldering responsibility for Daisy. And in the following case, “Snell was there three days before he went to the penitentiary, so drunk out on the gravel drive that Mrs. Ulysses Swett’s automobile ran over his right hand (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 40).” Moreover, in the two cases above, drunk driving is sensed by the author, especially during the Prohibition Period in the American history to corrupt people both physically and spiritually.

The types of car mentioned range from the commonplace to the coupe, limousine and station-wagon. “As we crossed Blackwell’s Island a limousine passed us, driven by a *white chauffeur*, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl (my emphasis) (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 44).” The show-off of three negroes in a luxury car driven by a white driver reminds the reader of the racist remarks made by Tom earlier in the novel. Here the technological diegesis constructed against the technological advances in real world poses a question of how the novel depicts reality. The author sardonically voices his disbelief in the modernity represented by science and technology in the statement that Tom has got his racist ideology from some books founded on scientific investigations. What’s more, Mr. Wilson’s peculiar role of second-car dealer acts as the catalyst for the tragedy he brings to the protagonist. “The only car visible was the

dust-covered wreck of a Ford which crouched in a dim corner (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 17).” This Mr. Wilson that belongs to the ashheaps between the Long Island Sound and New York, inevitably represents and embodies the destructive forces lurking behind the modern wealth.

The car accident that in the end ruins all the protagonists in *The Great Gatsby* is further complicated by Tom’s insistence in Daisy taking the same car with Gatsby. The excuse he gives, if in a detective story, gives the semblance of having had in mind the car accident that will bring Gatsby to destruction. The fatality of a car accident is obviously metaphorized here as it is elsewhere in the novel. “They were gone, without a word, snapped out, made accidental, isolated, like ghosts, even from our pity (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 86).” And they are made accidental in an accident, one physically while the other spiritually, to repeat the above. Though the metaphorical use of this scene sounds like a platitude to a reader familiar with the stereotyped use of it a TV play or film, the fact that Fitzgerald most probably is the first writer to use such a scene in a major novel will make anyone excuse his “pitfall”.

The telephone plays no less important role in promoting the plot development than the automobile in *The Great Gatsby*. From the perspective of narratology, the telephone has been here given by the novelist as a walking stick to the narrator of his story. His intention of not baring the story of Gatsby once for all to the reader is consummately accomplished by this device of telephone that constantly breaks the continuum of his narration and observation. As the information from a phone call is withheld from the listener, the interruption has been deftly employed by the author to create the needed suspense and mystery in his novel about a tycoon with suspicious wealth. It delineates the necessary tension between the writing and its reader that Gatsby seems to be at any time and place wanted on the phone. Greatly influenced by Joseph Conrad, Fitzgerald dramatizes the modern techniques of his novel by appealing to the fragmented narrative. “When, almost immediately, the telephone rang inside and the butler left the porch Daisy seized upon the momentary interruption and leaned toward me (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 11).” Here the interruption of a telephone call gives Daisy the opportunity to communicate the secret about the butler’s nose to the narrator. And this is important to a novel that has purposefully adopted the limited point of view.

The telephone communications popularly adopted to convey information in the novel further help bring down the geographical barrier that used to separate the United States in the West and the East. Though the narrator ends the novel by emphasizing that “this has been a story of the West, after all--Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 112).” The communications within the country has become easier than ever before. It also makes possible for many business transactions between different cities to be carried out without the businessmen coming together. And in the story, the telephone as a communicator is also exemplified by the orders for a taxi and foods the protagonists make in the novel.

Despite the above facts, the author is more interested in the telephone call as an informer. So the telephone that now in the story conveys information to each other from different places, as mentioned above, acts as both a communicator (of good as well as bad news) and informer.

It can be fully reasoned out that the author has as much a disbelief in the telephone communication as he has in a car. The dread for the destructive forces that modern technology might bring to human beings underlies the whole story. The conveniences resulting from the technological advances have nothing to do with happiness. The talk over the phone sustains and betrays information at the same time. This is foretold in a scene that seems to have been otherwise unnecessary to include in the novel. “Almost at the moment when Mr. Gatsby identified himself, a butler hurried toward him with the information that Chicago was calling him on the wire (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 32).” Shortly after he revealed his identity to me, Gatsby was interrupted by a phone call from Chicago, indicating that the long distance call is popular now. And he was later interrupted by other long-distance calls from several places and finally after his death, his secret was revealed to the narrator by a phone call answered by him out of contingency (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 106).

The violation of telephone rules is also severe to the characters involved in a scandal or crime. First, there is a principle voiced by Miss Baker about when Myrtle could telephone Tom, “She (Myrtle Wilson) might have the decency not to telephone him at dinner time. Don’t you think (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 12)?” However, Myrtle will not listen. What a panic the telephone has had on everyone present? “The telephone rang inside, startlingly, and as Daisy shook her head decisively at Tom the subject of the stables, in fact all subjects, vanished into air. ...my own instinct was to telephone immediately for the police (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 12).” The telephone has for more than once exposed the secret to those from whom the receiver would like to hide. “The Great Gatsby sardonically notes the criminal usage of technology (Reynolds, 1993, p. x).” The geographical detachment of crime and criminals sharply demonstrates a modernity that may arouse the author’s further disbelief in the advantages of machines. However, the long distance has since become the mysterious signal usually associated with criminality in a prototyped scene in novels and films. In this story it is finally revealed by a mistaken phone call.

The Great Gatsby is usually regarded as a symbolic piece of literary writing about the American Dream. But what is often neglected by critics is that the symbolism in the novel is presented both in content and structure. The involved

narration as created by the incessant interruption of phone calls is itself metaphorically constructed to represent the broken American Dream. Thanks to the limited omniscience of the narrator and the telephone prop, Carraway is able to “deal(s) out the information in such a manner that he seems to withhold it first, thus creating a superb effect of mystery and suspense (Chang, 2003, p. 224).” And thanks to the advice of the narrator’s father, no comment is made by the author in the novel. He leaves everything for the reader to make a judgment of his or her own.

To sum up, *The Great Gatsby* demonstrates Fitzgerald’s high sensitivity to the new advances in science and technologies. By adopting a limited omniscient narrative, the author cleverly integrates the technological forces into his writing of this modern novel. He particularly relies on the two main props of automobile and telephone to arrange his fragmented plots into a whole. The car accident and the telephone betrayal have since been prototyped in the literary world. And by emphasizing the destructive forces of machines, the writer inadvertently touches upon the theme later to haunt other American writers, including Thomas Pynchon and others. By the deliberate juxtaposition of men and women and machines and repeated appeal to the automobile as both carrier and destroyer and the telephone as both communicator and informer, the technological diegesis is fully established to create a masterpiece of the world literature.

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Table 1. Frequencies of Telephone and Automobile and Related Words

Categories	Breakdowns	Times
Automobile	Car	88
	Motor (including motorcycle, motorboat, motor hearse)	10
	Automobile	7
	Drive (V. & N.) and driver	46
Telephone	Telephone and phone (V. & N.)	35
	Call up	11
	Receiver	5