

## **“A Fragment of Lost Words”: Narrative Ellipses in *The Great Gatsby***

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As a great short novel, *The Great Gatsby* gathers force and power not only from what it says, but also from what it chooses not to say. Nick Carraway, Fitzgerald’s enigmatic narrator, relates Jay Gatsby’s story in a manner that is at once concise and elliptical. These two qualities are not at odds with each other; in fact, the more concise one is, the more one must leave out. Such narrative elisions—the places in the text where Nick omits important information or jumps over some event in Gatsby’s life or his own—might draw the reader’s attention to the process of selection that is at work in the novel as a whole. Every narrative has elisions. Wolfgang Iser terms these moments “gaps,” and argues that differences in interpretations arise from readers filling the narrative’s gaps in different ways:

One text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled. (280)

Such gaps are of particular importance in *The Great Gatsby*, for the novel’s brevity (180 pages in the Scribner edition) is predicated on its narrator’s selectivity, on his readiness to leave some things unsaid. Nick has powers of concentration and elimination that one might more readily associate with the lyric poet than with the novelist. The work of Iser and other narratologists suggests that Nick’s process of narrative selection and elision is an essential part of the story he tells. To understand what Nick says about Gatsby and himself, one might study not only Nick’s words, but also his elisions, omissions, and silences.

Before turning to the narrative of *The Great Gatsby*, it may be worth

defining narratology itself. Narratology might be thought of as an emerging field of study, a critical approach to literature, film, and other media that coalesces around Roland Barthes' writings of the 1960s and Wayne Booth's seminal 1961 study, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Yet one could also trace the discussion of narrative elements back to Aristotle's writing on drama, seeing the work of Barthes, Booth, and their contemporaries as continuing a conversation that is several millennia in the making. The early twentieth-century writings of the Russian formalists, notably Vladimir Propp and Mikhail Bakhtin, both of whose work began to appear in English translation in the 1970s, are likewise vital to this conversation. Narratologists also draw on the reflections and theories of English and American novelists, such as E. M. Forster and Henry James. Narratology is therefore a polyglot and heterogeneous school of theory. Its practitioners take a magpie's approach to literary criticism, making use of whatever material serves their needs.

It is appropriate that narratology should be a heterogeneous mode of criticism, for the literary form that is most commonly its subject—the novel—is itself profoundly heterogeneous. The novel is a mixed form, one that, in the hands of a good writer, is pliable, inclusive, and expansive. Its formal elements are so loosely defined as to seem infinitely responsive to the warp and woof of its themes and its subject matter. Its very name speaks of its “newness”; every great novel is a novelty. To see how widely novels vary in structure, one need only compare a collection of novels to a collection of, say, sermons, sonnets, fairy tales, or epics. Narratology may in fact be a response to the heterogeneous nature of the novel; it is an attempt to find a common language for discussing commonalities across radically different novels. The narratologist's focus on literary elements (such as plot or setting), on the representation of time and action, and on the relationships among author, narrator, character, and reader might be seen as an effort to develop a poetics of fiction.

Narratologists of all stripes would make a series of distinctions between author and narrator and between the text of the novel and the