

The Presentation of False Female Disclosures Through Repetition and Punctuation

The many forms of repetition and uses for the dash in The Great Gatsby show the perpetual insincerity of its female characters. By explaining Daisy's illogicality, Jordan's odd interjections, and Myrtle's patterned descriptions, these narrative quirks paint a façade of truth and intimate the women's overall dishonesty. Despite his differing relations with those characters, Nick Carraway's comments about their deceptions merge to produce a consistently negative view of women. As he listens to their confessions and weaves them into his story, he too unveils a truth about himself. He states, "I'm inclined to reserve all judgements . . . so it came about that in college I was unjustly accused of being a politician, because I was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men. Most of the confidences were unsought—frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation or a hostile levity when I have realized . . . that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon—for the intimate revelations of young men . . . are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions" (5-6). This passage establishes the repetitions and interruptions (or hasty "silencing" of initial thoughts) with which he instills and presents others' disclosures. The word "plagiaristic" evokes repetition by signifying the deceptive imitation of others' words. Likewise, phrases like "most of the confidences" and "usually" represent the recurrence of a specific quality of the accounts, while the words "inclined to" and "frequently" denote Nick's own repetition of actions. He even repeats the phrase "intimate revelation" as if he had overlooked its

earlier appearance. When he calls confessions "usually plagiaristic" and says he "frequently . . . [has] feigned" something, he connects the idea of repetition with that of deception or untruth. Moreover, the "obvious suppressions" he cites must refer to facts and truths. When he sets off "frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation or a hostile levity when I have realized . . . that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon" with the dashes, he presents the interruptions that pervade other figures' confessions. These dashes can represent a parenthetical reference or additional thought; a transition that lets him shift his focus from others' confidences to himself and back again; or a hesitation that helps him delay the completion of one thought and stifle others. By hindering the clarity of his self-expression, these unforeseen silences imply the partial suppression of truths.

Repetitions and interruptions suggest such falsehood when Nick describes his cousin Daisy Buchanan. During their visit to Gatsby's bedroom, he recounts, "Suddenly with a strained sound Daisy bent her head into [Gatsby's] shirts and began to cry stormily. 'They're such beautiful shirts,' she sobbed . . . 'It makes me sad because I've never seen such—such beautiful shirts before" (98). Daisy's statement represents a confession or a speaker's disclosure of her personal beliefs, feelings, knowledge, or past. Her manner of speaking, as Nick transcribes it, contains formal cues like repetitions and interruptions that produce conflicting implications about her sincerity. Initially, her repetition supports it when she utters the word "such" twice in the same sentence. In fact, she states it two consecutive times: "such—such." The dash between both words (which will receive greater attention below) indicates a hesitation in Daisy's articulation. The appearance of this pause within an otherwise continuous stream of words implies that a distinct force has caused it. Since the narrator mentions no external factors that would cut off Daisy's speech, the force that makes her pause must be internal. Perhaps she briefly stops speaking in order to reconsider what she wants to

say next. In accordance with this notion, the fact that she restates "such" after this period of thinking suggests she has decided to maintain her original thought. Notably, the "such" after the dash appears within the phrase "such beautiful shirts." Before the dash, since Daisy "sees" specific objects that must be the shirts, the first "such" must refer to those shirts just as the second "such" does. Therefore, the thought she restates alludes to the shirts' effect on her.

At first, this formal repetition suggests her candor. As Nick describes, passion "stormily" grips Daisy (98). In the midst of such emotion, she seems to neglect discreet, levelheaded behavior and to express herself sincerely. Daisy's utterances before her thoughtful pause, then, should be true. By committing to her original thought through the restatement of "such beautiful shirts," she implies her own honesty. Her repetition of ideas, however, thwarts its likelihood. Although Daisy's double reference to the shirts' beauty should emphasize their relevance, she ascribes emotional upheaval to the prettiness of a few pieces of clothing. The triviality of the latter seems a peculiar, illogical cause for the intensity of the former and for Daisy's need to stress this connection. Thus, by presenting a nonsensical correlation, repetition undermines the truth of her words.

The presence of the dash further weakens her honesty. It appears within the statement, "I've never seen such—such beautiful shirts before" (98). This mark indicates a hesitation or interruption in Daisy's speech. Since she does complete her original explanation for her condition, the effect of inhibitive thoughts during the pause seems minimal. Yet that brief silence also suggests the restraint of other thoughts. Even if she intended to speak of "beautiful shirts" from the start, some other idea must have piqued her mind and caused that interruption. Indeed, the improbability that the shirts upset her means she has not confessed a more reasonable cause. She only speaks of the "shirts" in order to hide the identity of that cause. Her words, then, represent a falsehood.

When Nick mentions Daisy's "basic insincerity" (22), he confirms her condition and suggests its perpetuity. The repetition and self-interruptions within her statement contribute to Nick's unsympathetic portrait of her truthfulness.

Similar devices help Nick raise doubts about one of Jordan Baker's disclosures, as well. In regard to Gatsby and Daisy's turbulent relationship, Jordan states:

Well, about six weeks ago, she heard the name Gatsby for the first time in years. It was when I asked you—do you remember?—if you knew Gatsby in West Egg. After you had gone home she came into my room and woke me up and said "What Gatsby?" and when I described him—I was half asleep—she said in the strangest voice that it must be the man she used to know. It wasn't until then that I connected this Gatsby with the officer in her white car.

(82-3)

In the sentence, "It was when I asked you—do you remember?—if you knew Gatsby in West Egg," repetition appears in the form of mental representation. Instead of saying words more than once to stress an idea, Jordan tries to make Nick remember a scene from the past. Such recollections involve the repetition of previous events within one's mind. When she asks him if he recalls that scene, the fact that she does not pause for his answer shows that she is not looking for a yes or no from him. Instead, her question merely cues to him the notion that he should remember the incident. Since the scene had to have occurred in order for him to recall it, this technique implies its actuality.

At first, the dashes in the above sentence support this condition. Before that sentence, Jordan talks about Daisy and refers to her in the third person: "Daisy never went in for amour" and "she heard" Gatsby's name. Within it, Jordan pulls her listener Nick into the account, i.e., "I asked you" and "if you knew" (82). These words allude to past actions akin to earlier events in her story. But then the interjection "do you remember?" signals a transition from the past into the present. When Jordan asks Nick if he recalls anything from the past, she refers to his current powers of recollection. This

new focus on the present highlights the relevance of her story in the here and now. This relevance, in turn, strengthens her story's apparent standing as truth.

Yet Jordan's grammatical interruptions ultimately reverse this condition. She already stirs Nick's memory when she speaks of the recent past; a more explicit provocation seems unnecessary. Nonetheless, she cuts off her own words and asks, "do you remember?" (82). Since Nick should already be remembering, this question seems superfluous. Jordan slips in those words as if she is trying to guarantee that Nick indeed recalls that scene. When she interrupts herself by saying, "It was when I asked you—do you remember?", she has not provided enough specifics for him to know what to remember. Her interjection is hasty, as if she wants to make sure he perceives the scene in question as a truth from the past before he has a legitimate reason to believe it as such. Under these circumstances, Jordan's hurried silencing of one thought by the insertion of another shows how she tries to validate the first thought with the second one, as if the former cannot stand alone. Hence, the insertion between the dashes implies her verbal duplicity.

Other breaks in Jordan's speech also expose the fraudulence of her words. As she retells how Daisy reacts to Gatsby's name, Jordan's parenthetical reference, "I was half asleep," between her allusions to Gatsby and to Daisy's voice (82-3), seems extraneous. Even if it were true, that information seems irrelevant as a mere statement of fact. As Jordan recounts her act of describing Gatsby, that interjection qualifies her manner of delivery by illustrating her condition. In essence, the fact that she "was half asleep" explains why she spoke of Gatsby in a certain way. But why does Jordan explain herself at all? She does so right before she mentions Daisy's response in that "strangest voice." Perhaps Jordan senses trouble to come. Her excuse of grogginess, then, serves to downplay any role she may have in future misfortunes. Beneath four short words between two dashes, Jordan suppresses her dread and thus hides some

truths about her condition. Even in this moment of disclosure, she does not confess her own knowledge and feelings so much as she tries to manipulate those of her listener. When Nick calls her "incurably dishonest" (63), he corroborates the instances of deception above. Although she has taken over his narrative in this passage, Nick, as the main narrator, may still have the authority to shape and structure her words to match them with his own observations. By showing the repetitions and interruptions that imply mere façades or active suppressions of truth, he characterizes her account as false.

These repetitions and interruptions also color Myrtle Wilson's story in differing shades of truth. Although Nick has the least personal relationship with her, he lets the same shiftiness flow forth from these facets of her speech. Myrtle recounts the day she met Tom as follows:

It was on the two little seats facing each other that are always the last ones left on the train. I was going up to New York to see my sister and spend the night. He had on a dress suit and patent leather shoes and I couldn't keep my eyes off him but every time he looked at me I had to pretend to be looking at the advertisement over his head. When we came into the station he was next to me and his white shirt front pressed against my arm—and so I told him I'd have to call a policeman but he knew I lied. I was so excited that when I got into a taxi with him I didn't hardly know I wasn't getting into a subway train. All I kept thinking about over and over was "You can't live forever, you can't live forever."

(40)

Initially, one subtle example of repetition evokes the idea of truth. It involves Myrtle's shifts of focus between two subjects: Tom and herself. When she says, "I was going up to New York to see my sister," she naturally begins the account of her trip by describing her own circumstances and goals. The next sentence abruptly introduces a new subject: an unidentified "he" who wore nice clothes. Mid-sentence, the focus shifts back to Myrtle, then "he," and so forth until they have finally exchanged words. Granted, this oscillation between the same two subjects is not a new or particularly distinctive technique. In its most mundane form, it illustrates an interaction between a pair, while

dialogues and plays feature its most stylistic manifestation. Nonetheless, in Myrtle's speech, this alternation between figures illustrates a repetition of a pattern rather than of a statement.

The content of the passage, specifically allusions to sight, maintains this formal pattern. First, Myrtle plans to visit or "see" a relative. When Tom appears without warning, she identifies him not by name but by appearance, i.e., what she sees when she looks at him. As she re-concentrates on her own circumstances, she also returns to the trope of sight. When she then says, "I couldn't keep my eyes off him," she simply underlines this trope. As she shifts the focus back to Tom with the fragment, "every time he looked at me," she also extends the theme of sight to him. Tom's glance, in turn, induces Myrtle to "pretend to be looking at the advertisement over his head," so that she, too, continues the pattern. Evidently, as Myrtle bounces between Tom and herself, she also maintains the theme of visual contact. Although Myrtle does, at one point, veer her gaze toward something else, this play of glances illustrates Myrtle and Tom's attempts to observe and gather information about each other. This process represents a scientist or artist's search for truth. Myrtle's thematic repetition, then, suffuses her current statement with the earnestness of her past actions.

A more explicit repetition downplays her genuine feeling. Myrtle recounts how, in the taxi with Tom, "All I kept thinking about over and over was 'You can't live forever, you can't live forever'" (40). In this statement, Myrtle repeats two sets of words: "over" and "You can't live forever." The latter phrase carries a more telling burden of truth. It expresses an obvious fact about the human condition—namely, mortality. In that scene from the past, she repeated the phrase to herself in order to emphasize and remind herself of its truth. At the same time, her mental perpetuation of this idea conflicted with the finality of mortality. Although the phrase should have stirred her toward action, the precious time she spent repeating it delayed any real action. Such a delay suggests

inhibitions beneath her eager exterior. As an actor in that earlier scene, Myrtle's repetition stifled her true feelings.

This restraint recurs when Myrtle plays the present-time storyteller. When she says she had spoken her mantra "over and over," she informs her listeners of the fact of that repetition. She does not need to illustrate this repetition further by actually repeating the phrase as she had in the taxi. Yet in the present, she still utters "you can't live forever" twice. Her decision to unnecessarily repeat the phrase to her listeners implies her fear that they will not believe her unless she illustrates the repetition as it had actually occurred. Both now and then, the duplication of that truth actually hides one about her state of mind.

Other words in Myrtle's disclosure merely evoke the idea of repetition to raise questions about her honesty. She mentions how two seats "are always the last ones left on the train" and refers to the aversion of her eyes "every time [Tom] looked at [her]" (40). Although they appear only once in this passage, the words "always" and "every time" signify the recurrence of a circumstance or action from the past. When she claims she glanced away "every time" Tom looked at her, she refers to an isolated situation in which she was present. In this case, she probably was able to notice Tom's glimpses and could have confirmed their frequency. In order to know that the two train seats were "always" empty, though, Myrtle would have had to be sure that exceptions had never appeared. This condition would have entailed perpetual observation, which she could not have carried out. Myrtle's use of "always," then, may not be accurate. Despite the word's harmlessly flippant nature, this inaccuracy tarnishes the honesty that "every time" seemed to establish.

As in Daisy and Jordan's statements, the dash in Myrtle's story ultimately exposes her insincerity. The mark appears when she states, "his white shirt front pressed against my arm—and so I told him I'd have to call a policeman but he knew I

lied" (40). Before the dash, Myrtle and Tom are still strangers and neither one speaks a word to the other; their communication only consists of interested but crisscrossing glances. After the dash, Myrtle's mock threat and Tom's awareness of her falsehood represent their first attempt to verbally or mentally reach out to the other. Since Myrtle feels "excited" and follows Tom into the taxi immediately after this connection, their relationship has gained an intensity that contrasts their previous detachment. The dash denotes their emotional transition from observant strangers to paramours. Their true status as lovers (31) supports the accuracy of this interpretation. Still, that mark shatters her supposed reliability as it represents her only pause in the story. By bridging the moments of wordlessness with the moment she first talks to Tom, her present instance of silence paradoxically signals the moment she broke it in the past. Yet her first utterance to Tom—the threat to call the police—was, as Tom "knew," a lie. That punctuation mark thus heralds her use of deception.

This manipulation applies to Myrtle's emotions as well as to her knowledge. The dash shows she hesitates between her description of Tom's shirt as it "pressed against her arm" and of the utterance of her first words. The words "and so" that immediately follow this pause imply a causal relationship between the events that appear before and after the dash. Tom's touch, then, sparks Myrtle's decision to speak to him. Although this reaction seems natural, the presence of the dash suggests the existence of a deeper, more telling step in that transition. In this account of a budding romance, emotion must be that mediating force, one that arises from a distinct source (physical contact) and causes a separate effect (verbal communication). Hence, Myrtle's concealment of her feelings under the dash—rather than her expression of them through words—attests to her partial suppression of truths. Indeed, according to Nick, "the room rang full of her artificial laughter" after her disclosure (40). This circumstance immediately makes the validity of her story suspect. By calling the laughter "artificial" in

the first place, Nick reveals his distrust of Myrtle and her intentions. He lets the formal and content-related quirks of her speech unsympathetically characterize her as a deceiver.

Despite his status as the narrator, not even Nick bares all his motives behind his depictions of female characters. By embedding his cynical descriptions of the women within the narrative, he implies his objectivity as a narrator while suppressing his subjectivity as a character. Although he calls himself "one of the few honest people that I have ever known" (64), Nick obscures the true nature of his perceptions as much as Daisy, Jordan, and Myrtle do.