Before we can answer this question about the main character and narrator of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, we must dispense with a number of naive assumptions; first, that if Nick were gay, he would have admitted it to the reader.

*Gatsby* takes place in America at the end of World War I, in a climate marked by Social Darwinism and at the apogee of the Ku Klux Klan in places as far north as Oregon and Illinois. Things we take for granted today, such as interracial marriage and private sex acts not involving procreation, were codified criminal acts in 1920s America. Seeking out true intimacy as a gay man decades before “Will & Grace,” before the Stonewall riots, before the civil rights and gender equality movements of the 1960s and 1970s, was possible only in secret. A gay man risked uncomfortable questions about bachelorhood if he eschewed marriage. A wise man followed a much safer course: feigning heterosexuality, marrying, and raising a family, while keeping his homosexuality clandestine. If the wife found out, she had little recourse: women could not survive easily on their own, and even less effectively as single parents, with so few career options and the burden of proof practically, if not legally, when seeking alimony from the courts. She might suspect her husband of cheating, but she would likely tolerate it.

This tragic pattern has been and continues to be the norm for all gay men attempting to live as family men in societies dominated by misogynistic religious hierarchies interested in enforcing strict gender roles, from all of the Protestant former British colonies, to the Catholic world, to the Muslim Middle East, to orthodox Jewish communities, and Mormon communities, and even like-minded tribes in the Third World. Even in the twenty-first century’s more permissive climate, middle-aged American men such as former New Jersey Governor Jim McGreevey are peeking out of the closet only after failing to make it work with a woman. Centuries of oppression are not so easily undone. If Governor McGreevey couldn't admit his homosexuality to himself in 2004 because he was terrified of losing his family, his friends, and his career, we can hardly expect Nick Carraway to have done the same over eighty years prior.

The second naive assumption is that a gay man could not have, nor would not have even tried, to have sex with a woman. The idea of a happy young gay couple, living together and in love, and never having experimented with the opposite sex, was unthinkable in 1920. The situation in *Gatsby’s* America was more akin to the ancient world, where sex with women was expected for the purpose of raising a family, and sex with men was often tolerated if kept discreet. A typical gay man living in 1920 would not have considered moving in with a lover. He would have suppressed any feelings of love for a man and continued searching for love with a woman, while doing what came naturally to him on the side, as if it were nothing
more than a bad habit that needed managing, like laying bets at the dog track, or smoking
cigars. So we can hardly be surprised if Nick Carraway attempts to date women, and
attempts to make light of any success he might be having, because it’s expected. Nick’s
contemporaries expect it, and Nick’s readers expect it.

The third naive assumption is that heterosexual readers would be able to discern Nick’s
homosexuality with ease if it existed. Given the climate, the book could not have sold if its
narrator were obviously homosexual. We can expect, if in fact Nick is gay, that his gay
readers will be the first and perhaps the only ones to be able to read the tea leaves, whether
or not Nick means for them to find out. The most authentic gay Nick Carraway would not
want anyone, not even a gay reader, to discover his secret. It would therefore be a work of
extraordinary genius to create a narrator intent on hiding this secret, who allows it to seep
out unintentionally, because like the other characters in the book, he cannot deny, nor hide
completely, his true nature.

The fourth naive assumption is that this author included descriptions and events that were
entirely arbitrary, and not supportive of an American theme or a truth about human nature,
either on the surface, or below the surface. Because Gatsby belongs to the undidactic
modernist tradition of allowing readers to decipher meaning for themselves, it must be
concluded that if a pattern can be established explaining a series of ambiguities, the pattern
is more likely intentional than unintentional on the part of an artist as gifted as Fitzgerald.

Which brings us to the text itself. The first and most striking aspect of Nick Carraway’s
sexuality is how much it differs from Gatsby’s. The intensity of Gatsby’s passionate single-
mindedness overwhelms him at the moment of his reunification with Daisy. He’s “pale as
death, with his hands plunged like weights in his coat pockets” before meeting her (91), then
minutes later, after kissing her, “he literally glowed; without a word or a gesture of
exultation a new well-being radiated from him and filled the room” (94). Around Daisy,
Gatsby sweats emotion. It’s understandable. Every aspect of his life has been constructed for
one purpose: to claim the only woman he ever truly loved. If he can’t have her, he will remain
a bachelor to the end of his days. He is incapable of loving any other woman. Nick, by
contrast, is so dispassionate towards women, one wonders if he can love any woman at all.

The only relationship with any long-term potential for Nick involves Jordan Baker. Her name
is telling. Daisy and Myrtle are named for flowers, lively and vibrant and feminine in their
different ways. Jordan, by contrast, is an oddly androgynous name that complements her
strangely masculine 1920s career, that of a professional golfer. Nick admits, “I enjoyed
looking at her. She was a slender, small-breasted girl with an erect carriage which she
accentuated by throwing her body backward at the shoulders like a young cadet” (15). The
use of the words “cadet” and “erect” to describe Jordan cannot be accidental; it is clearly her
maleness that Nick appreciates most. Does this make him gay? Not by itself. Straight men are
attracted to, and curious about, all sorts of women.
But Fitzgerald does not describe Nick’s interest in Jordan as anything that could be misconstrued as sexual, let alone romantic. Nick’s interest remains inert, and sterile. For example, after admitting that he likes looking at her androgynous physique, the second thing he recognizes is that she was once the object of “a critical, unpleasant story” printed in a newspaper (23), that he later remembers to be a retracted accusation of cheating on the golf course (63). This is not a person he admires.

Interactions between Nick and Jordan reek of disinterest. At Gatsby’s party “she held my hand impersonally” (47). He attaches himself to her only because he’s embarrassed to be thought of as single by the other guests (46). Upon finding out that she is being pursued by a “persistent undergraduate given to violent innuendo” (49), Nick seems preoccupied with the various ways in which the guests are making fools of themselves. He feels neither protective nor jealous. A moment later we find out Jordan is using him as well; she uses him as an excuse to get away from people she finds uninteresting (49). Later, he notices “that she wore her evening dress, all her dresses, like sports clothes—there was a jauntiness about her movements as if she had first learned to walk upon golf courses on clean, crisp mornings” (55). When she leaves the party, “her brown hand waved a jaunty salute” (57). The word “jaunty” is not necessarily masculine, but its denotation, “sprightly” or “buoyant,” belies an ambiguous, asexual connotation, as though Nick were describing a foal or a goat.

Is the sometimes clinical, sometimes critical way Nick sees Jordan explained by the fact that he’s a rigid, insensitive man in general? Not a chance. When Daisy and Gatsby renew their acquaintance with awkward embarrassment in Nick’s living room, he seems to suffer it right along with them. “My own face had now assumed a deep tropical burn. I couldn’t muster up a single commonplace out of the thousand in my head” (92). He even uses the word “humiliation” to describe the thought of Daisy using his bath towels presumably neither fresh nor folded in order to wash her face (95). Near the end he feels “resentment, that Daisy hadn’t sent a message or a flower” for Gatsby’s funeral (183). He even denies Tom the courtesy of a handshake because of his role in the tragedy (187). Nick is highly judgmental, and sharply critical of much that is going on around him. The truth is that the events surrounding Gatsby are infinitely more interesting to him, arousing more passionate feelings of all sorts throughout the affair, than anything to do with Jordan Baker, or any other woman.

The next time he sees Jordan, he admits, “I was flattered to go places with her because she was a golf champion” (62). He’s trying to fit in. Also, he states, “I wasn’t actually in love, but I felt a sort of tender curiosity” (62), a strange phrase that one might apply to a woman anxious to see her best friend’s newborn baby. He notices that she’s “haughty” and again that she has a “jaunty body.” In the same passage he describes the depth of her “dishonesty,” and he states flippantly, “It made no difference to me. Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply” (63).
What? On the contrary; in the 1920s, men tended to be forgiven their dishonesty much more readily than women. Women were little more than prized possessions, in the eyes of many men. Women were expected to live by different standards of loyalty and obedience, a concept aptly portrayed in *Gatsby* by Tom and Daisy Buchanan, and by George and Myrtle Wilson. Nick’s attitude, by contrast, seems more female than male, more likely something a woman might say about men: Dishonesty in men is a thing you never blame deeply.

In the same scene, she’s driving, and he’s the passenger, further emphasizing the role reversal in terms of gender. And, they argue about her driving the way siblings or close friends or longtime spouses would, not the way singles courting one another would (63).

And then the reader is thrown a hefty curveball:

...for a moment I thought I loved her. But I am slow thinking and full of interior rules that act as brakes on my desires, and I knew that first I had to get myself definitely out of that tangle back home. I’d been writing letters once a week and signing them Love, Nick, and all I could think of was how, when that certain girl played tennis, a faint mustache of perspiration appeared on her upper lip. Nevertheless there was a vague understanding that had to be tactfully broken off before I was free. Everyone 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 (63-4).

On the surface, it appears that Nick is hiding a heretofore-unknown girlfriend in Wisconsin, also sporty, to whom he feels obligated, someone who must be dumped before he can enter into a romantic relationship with Jordan. The word “mustache” is a little strange given what we’ve noticed so far, but what’s striking about this passage is the way in which he extols his own honesty. This, after beginning the book by proclaiming that “I’m inclined to reserve all judgments” (5), before spending most of the rest of the book remembering all the instances in which he evaluated and criticized everyone and everything around him. We wouldn't be so attentive to his critical nature had he not begun with a disclaimer contradicting it, of course. But precisely because he did, his unreliability as a narrator when speaking about himself is well-established long before this bit about honesty.

Perhaps the most honest thing about the passage may be the phrase, “interior rules that act as brakes on my desires.” The mindset governing the words and actions of a closeted gay man could not be more succinctly stated. So is he being honest about the girl back home, or is he placating the reader in order to forestall any suspicion? We must consider, at least, the possibility that all or part of this episode is a lie, precisely because Nick trumpets his own honesty, precisely because he should not feel the need. We must consider the possibility that
the mysterious girl is nothing more than a ruse, an excuse to explain why he hasn’t put the moves on Jordan.

An attentive objector will remember that Daisy and Tom question Nick at the beginning of the text about a rumor that he was engaged to be married. Nick objects, “It’s libel. I’m too poor.”

This is absurd. Since when do two people call off a marriage and end their love affair because they’re poor? Nick certainly had enough money to move his life eastward, and besides, ninety years ago, the bride’s parents were the ones typically responsible for the cost of her marriage, not the groom. Even Daisy pays no attention to it. She claims she “heard it from three people so it must be true.”

Nick doesn’t answer; instead he admits he knew what they were talking about, but denies any engagement. “The fact that gossip had published the banns was one of the reasons I had come east. You can’t stop going with an old friend on account of rumors and I had no intention of being rumored into marriage” (24). So in other words, he didn’t love her either. Too little has happened just twenty-four pages into the text to find this episode strange. Looking back on it, however, and knowing what we know so far about Jordan Baker, it stands out. Nick personifies “gossip” as a creature trumpeting the engagement as effectively as a church parish making a formal announcement. What could have been so terrible about such rumors? Clearly the rumors were widespread, traveling through a series of friends and family members from Wisconsin all the way to East Egg, but it’s difficult to understand how the rumors could have been all that troubling to a man with nothing to hide. On the other hand, the rumors would have terrified a man with something to hide. As a closeted gay man with no intention of marrying his female companion, he would not have appreciated the spotlight, and as the object of persistent rumors, he would have worried about the rumors morphing into whispers speculating about the real reason he wasn’t getting married after all. It would have been perfectly natural to do exactly what millions of gay men have been doing throughout American history: escaping the small town scrutiny and possible approbation of friends and family by fleeing to the relative safety of the big city.

If this interpretation is wrong, a better one must be offered. Why else would Fitzgerald include this episode, a piece of conversation unrelated to Daisy, Tom, or Gatsby? It can only be there for the purpose of revealing something about Nick. Perhaps its purpose is merely surface-level: it exists only to tell us how much Nick dislikes gossip. But perhaps its purpose is larger, and more significant, when connected to other episodes.

My attentive objector will remember the kiss between Nick and Jordan at the end of Chapter IV. After spending the afternoon at the Plaza Hotel talking about Gatsby, they’re driving near Central Park, and Nick says:
I put my arm around Jordan’s golden shoulder and drew her toward me and asked her to dinner. Suddenly I wasn’t thinking of Daisy and Gatsby anymore but of this clean, hard, limited person who dealt in universal skepticism and who leaned back jauntily just within the circle of my arm. A phrase began to beat in my ears with a sort of heady excitement: “There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy and the tired.”

“And Daisy ought to have something in her life,” murmured Jordan to me.

“Does she want to see Gatsby?”

“She’s not to know about it. Gatsby doesn’t want her to know. You’re just supposed to invite her to tea.”

...Unlike Gatsby and Tom Buchanan I had no girl whose disembodied face floated along the dark cornices and blinding signs and so I drew up the girl beside me, tightening my arms. Her wan scornful mouth smiled and so I drew her up again, closer, this time to my face (84).

Francis Cugat used this passage to paint the novel’s cover art, “Celestial Eyes,” the same year the book was first published. Is this passage also Nick’s cover, the façade he wants the world to see? Yes: once again, he uses the word “jauntily.” The other words describing Jordan, “clean, hard, limited,” seem cold and void of admiration. She is not even remotely feminine. However, and for the first time, Nick seems to be feeling something that sounds a bit more like lust: the “golden shoulder,” the “heady excitement,” and the implied kiss. And yet, in spite of the fact that Nick says he isn’t thinking about Gatsby “anymore,” after an entire afternoon during which he and Jordan apparently discussed little else, Gatsby interrupts his thinking yet again, just seconds later, and we are told that Nick is about to kiss Jordan because he wants to have what Gatsby and Tom both have, not because he finds Jordan attractive, either on the outside or on the inside.

Clearly he’s going to give it a try, but that hardly makes him straight. We are not privy to the kiss itself; what’s described here is the distracted anticipation, and a glimpse of the fragmented hope that he can feel just a fraction of the passion that others feel. If we read closely, we already know the effort will prove futile, because Nick’s thinking in this crucial passage is closer to that of a closeted gay man who wants to fit in, than it is to a straight man pursuing an object of desire. Sure enough, we find out that he arrives home not much later the same evening by himself (84). Apparently, not much ensued after the kiss.

Did anything physical ever take place between the two of them? It’s reasonable to object that Nick is too decent and moral to share the details of such an encounter. In fact, he might even fashion himself a man determined to remain pure until his wedding night. But these notions feel wrong for two reasons. First, Nick leaves little doubt about the consummation of Daisy’s
and Gatsby’s relationship: “At his lips touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete” (117). Judging from the transparent flower metaphor, it’s not the subject of extramarital sex he’s shy about, at least, not for someone living in 1920s America. Although Nick frowns on Gatsby’s “appalling sentimentality,” he faithfully romanticizes the incident in celestial, superlative terms, comparing Gatsby’s state of mind when kissing Daisy to the “mind of God” (117). Nick doesn’t let Gatsby tell us himself. Instead he recounts the incident on his friend’s behalf, because the words matter less than the power of the emotions, and because Nick’s recounting decreases the reader’s distance to the incident. He empathizes, and he wants us to do the same.

Second, if Nick maintains abstinence because of his Christian beliefs, he makes no mention of them, and no allusion to them. Not even Fitzgerald would ask us to make that leap with no clues whatsoever. Like America, Nick seems adrift, unable to make sense of the growing conflict between religious America and modern science, a conflict best exemplified in the sensational 1924 Scopes monkey trial, publicized one year before Gatsby’s first printing.

Solving the problem of Jordan Baker might prove easier if we wear the writer’s hat instead of the reader’s hat. If we assume that her existence isn’t merely arbitrary—very little, if anything, is arbitrary in Gatsby—then we must follow any clues we can find that will help us understand why she’s there. None of the clues point toward real intimacy with Nick. On the contrary, all of the clues point the other way: toward an awkward lack of intimacy. The trick is to figure out the reason or reasons why Fitzgerald made this choice.

Is Jordan a foil to better illuminate Daisy’s femininity? No. These women appear in scenes together but they’re never directly juxtaposed.

Did he create a lack of intimacy to keep Nick’s role as observer more pure, to keep the focus of the story away from Nick’s personal life? If so, why include Jordan Baker at all? She need not be the one to relate the history of the Louisville love affair between Daisy and Gatsby. Other than that retelling, her words and actions do very little to illuminate the characters of Gatsby, Daisy, or Tom; on the contrary, her odd presence distracts us from Gatsby more than anything. We are forced to conclude that she exists in order to illuminate something about Nick.

During the affair between Gatsby and Daisy, Nick admits he doesn’t see much of Gatsby; instead, “I was in New York, trotting around with Jordan and trying to ingratiate myself with her senile aunt” (107). A young man courting a woman should not find this situation quite so challenging. It’s not as if he must impress a protective father and an extended family; apparently, the only family she’s got is a woman beset with old age. In addition, the verb “trotting” conjures the same horsey images “jaunty” does. The statement contains no hint of affection. Nick seems to be passing the time, and enduring the tedium. He’s not trying.
Predictably, it doesn’t work out in the end. We aren’t told why. Nick simply states that saying good-bye to Jordan is a “awkward, unpleasant thing” that he needn’t do, but feels obligated. Jordan remarks, “You said a bad driver was only safe until she met another bad driver? Well, I met another bad driver, didn’t I? I mean it was careless of me to make such a wrong guess. I thought you were rather an honest, straightforward person” (185-6). On the surface, she’s simply stating the obvious: they weren’t meant for each other. But what’s going on under the surface? She doesn’t seem overly offended; the remark feels matter-of-fact and a little sardonic, as though she’s finally recognized something for which she refuses to take responsibility. Her words suggest she’s only pretending to take responsibility; she feels he’s been careless and dishonest towards her. Careless how? Dishonest how? Is she feeling unfairly targeted by his moral indignation towards New York and his growing abhorrence of the aimlessly rich? Or has she, after a summer of waiting, concluded that Nick is unable to summon any species of passion for her? In some respect or another, she realizes that she’s seriously misjudged him.

All he can say in response to this is, “I’m thirty... I’m five years too old to lie to myself and call it honor” (185-6). He isn’t defensive, and he doesn’t argue. Whatever she’s talking about, he’s content to acknowledge it, then leave it undissected. What can’t he “lie” about? His lack of love for her? If so, why in the world did he court a woman he didn’t like for so long? To a heterosexual reader, the comment reflects nothing more than a series of awkward dates gone completely nowhere after too much effort; to a gay reader, the comment raises a big red flag.

If Nick’s ambiguous relationship with Jordan Baker were the only indicator of his homosexuality, there might not be enough evidence to make the case. It should show itself in other ways, and it does.

Nick’s reason for being a bachelor is not at all clear. During the summer in question, he turns thirty (186), this in a society where many, if not most, married before twenty. As narrator he makes the kind of halfhearted efforts we would expect from a gay man in a sexually repressed society trying to keep up appearances. “I even had a short affair with a girl who lived in Jersey City and worked in the accounting department but her brother began throwing mean looks in my direction so when she went on her vacation in July I let it blow quietly away” (61). Mean looks? Really? Either Nick wasn’t too interested in her to begin with, or he wasn’t actually interested in her at all; how else can we explain his ambivalence?

Of course, in today’s society we take “affair” to mean “extramarital sex,” but in the context of a proper young man trying to behave as expected in the 1920s, “affair” likely means that he was merely courting her. This is especially true if her family had the money to take vacation, and she was a single bachelorette looking for a good husband; in that case she would be careful to nurture her reputation. He doesn’t specify because it’s not important to him. And so the significance of the episode may be the way in which it’s barely mentioned at all, as insignificant and droll to him as the library where he “studied investments and securities” for
an hour each day (61). Or as droll as his pursuit of Jordan. It doesn’t matter which woman he’s interacting with; each of them are as drained of passion as a dentist appointment.

The reason for the story, Gatsby himself, reveals even more about Nick. Gatsby, of whom Nick emphatically disapproves (162), “who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn” (6), is described in glowing and admiring terms, repeatedly and throughout the text. When he finally meets Gatsby, he describes his smile as “one of those rare smiles [that] 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” (52-3). The passion here is undeniable. The question is, exactly what kind of passion are we talking about? Is it vulgar to suggest that the sensation of feeling X-rayed by another human being’s smile may betray a sort of attraction both intellectual and sexual at its core? Is it outrageous to point out that a gay man (or a straight woman) could feel affectionate toward a straight man, with no intention of acting upon any secret impulses he or she may harbor?

Admittedly, with no other evidence, such suggestions are fanciful at best. But this isn’t the only passage in which the language suggests Nick is indulging a harmless crush. When leaving Gatsby’s party, he admits, “there seemed to be a pleasant significance in having been among the last to go, as if he desired it all the time” (58). Can this comment be attributed solely to Gatsby’s magnetic personality? If so, Nick seems to be the only one who notices it. Gatsby’s invisible at his own party, mingling among the guests the way King Henry V mingled in disguise, unknown among his troops, on the eve of battle. The guests aren’t lured by Gatsby’s magnetism; they’re lured by the lavish party and the big house. They don’t fawn over him; they don’t try to win his favor. This of course reflects Gatsby’s ill-gotten new money, and yet, while Nick is likewise unimpressed by Gatsby’s wealth, his behavior is unique. He is the only one who disapproves of Gatsby’s parasites far more than he disapproves of Gatsby himself.

And nowhere in the text is the writing more emotional than in Nick’s recounting of Gatsby’s reunification with Daisy, almost every bit of which is spent focused on Gatsby’s expressions, Gatsby’s words, and Gatsby’s every movement (88-102). At the finish, after it becomes apparent that Gatsby will not win Daisy’s hand, Nick can’t bear to leave his side, skipping train after train (161). Toward no one else in the book does he feel as strongly, as consistently. His unflinching loyalty even compels him to take full responsibility for Gatsby’s funeral. Of course he would have us believe it’s his strong sense of decency that compels him. Why, then, does this sense of decency fail him at all other times? Unfortunately for Myrtle, that sense of decency fails to compel Nick to intervene or even protest when Tom breaks her nose; unfortunately for Jordan, that sense of decency fails to compel Nick to recognize that he is leading her on, that the two of them have no future together; unfortunately for Daisy,
that sense of decency fails to compel Nick to interfere in what is obviously an abusive, loveless marriage. Only Gatsby is worthy of Nick’s “sense of decency.”

Does all this mean that Nick is in love with Gatsby? Of course not. But his puppy-dog loyalty and mothlike admiration ring strange, unless the reader is a gay male who can recall a straight male friend with whom he found a satisfying platonic closeness. Often the friend is not a close personal friend, because their proximity is accidental: they’re acquaintances sitting next to one another in a high school class, or they’re fraternity brothers in college, or they’re colleagues at work, or they’re neighbors. Over time the gay one develops a harmless affinity for the straight one, uncharacteristically and often hypocritically overlooking his own disapproval of his new friend’s boorishness, or the way he treats women, or his criminal activities, or some other shortcoming. The gay one’s loyalty intensifies over time even though the two of them are not close friends, and do not share their private thoughts the way the gay one might do with his best female friends. He may even go out of his way to perform favors for his friend that he would not perform for anyone else. Eventually they part ways, as accidentally and suddenly as they met, and they lose touch because the straight one never thought of the relationship as a friendship worth maintaining, and the gay one wistfully remembers how much he liked being around his old friend, how much he admired him.

Sound familiar? Except for Gatsby’s death, this is a prototypical accidental friendship between a gay man and a straight man, the kind maintained entirely by the adoring gay man. Gatsby’s death inflates Nick’s nostalgia to the point of writing a memoir in his honor.

Who better to tell Gatsby’s story, than through the eyes of an observer fixed, at all times, on Gatsby himself?

All the evidence presented—thus far circumstantial, to be sure—becomes overwhelming when used to illuminate the incident at the end of Chapter II, when Nick leaves Myrtle’s apartment in a drunken stupor. In the pandemonium that ensues after Tom breaks Myrtle’s nose, Nick notices for no particular reason the dazed departure of the photographer Mr. McKee, “a pale, feminine man from the flat below” (34), and decides to follow him (41-2). Perhaps Nick is simply following someone else’s cue to escape the suddenly hysterical crisis unfolding in front of him.

In the elevator, however, McKee invites Nick to lunch. “Where?” Nick asks. “Anywhere,” McKee replies. Then, inexplicably, the elevator boy yells at McKee for touching “the lever” (42). Obviously the elevator boy is annoyed about something. What could it be? McKee’s shocked answer indicates he had no idea he might be touching the lever; the two men aren’t drunk and disorderly; their words aren’t slurred; they’re guests of the wealthy Tom Buchanan and his mistress. Such boldness on the part of a lowly elevator boy implies something is very much amiss.
Nick agrees to lunch, then, following an ellipse indicating the passage of time. He reports, “I was standing beside his bed and he was sitting up between the sheets, clad in his underwear, with a great portfolio in his hands” (42). McKee is showing Nick his photographs. My attentive objector will protest: What could be more innocent? Surely the episode reflects nothing more than the alcohol-induced intermittent memory of a night of partying. Looking for meaning here would be like panning for gold in Iowa. But such a careless dismissal of the episode assumes Fitzgerald included it arbitrarily. He certainly didn’t include it to show that Nick doesn’t mind engaging in an illegal, and sometimes indecent activity, because Nick drinks again heavily at Gatsby’s party (46, 51).

Upon further reflection, we must conclude or at least consider the possibility that Nick finds himself in the bedroom of a virtual stranger clad in his underwear, in the middle of the night, because the consumption of alcohol has allowed him to recognize a rare hook-up opportunity. There is no possibility they will be interrupted, because McKee’s wife remains embroiled in the drama of Myrtle’s broken nose. Beyond the words “bed” and “underwear,” the language is suggestive: a stranger of low stature, an elevator boy, reacts angrily to the touching of a lever. Either it’s euphemistic, or it’s an indication McKee has done something to earn the boy’s disgust. Perhaps the boy despises his femininity. Perhaps he’s seen McKee bring men home before. In addition, the sharing of photographs, McKee’s career and life’s work, is an enormously intimate act, even more so because Fitzgerald has already taken the trouble to establish McKee’s passion for his profession, earlier, when McKee discusses all the photographs he’s taken of his wife, and when he draws Tom’s humiliating ridicule after requesting a referral to serve Long Island’s wealthy elite (36-7).

After another ellipse, Nick reports, “I was lying half asleep in the cold lower level of the Pennsylvania Station, staring at the morning Tribune and waiting for the four o’clock train” (42). When he’s around men, he’s up late. When he’s around women, he retires early. By itself it doesn’t amount to much, but when all of Nick’s private episodes are pieced together, an undeniable pattern emerges. He is gay. Not bisexual—gay.

Is it wishful thinking by a gay reader eager to see his world reflected? Is it possible Fitzgerald conceived Nick so ambiguously that he functions like an astrological horoscope, so vague that the reader can see whatever he wants to see?

No. The evidence does not support this. In every instance, Nick’s thinking mirrors the thinking of a closeted gay man unable to deny his true nature. As readers conditioned to believe that heterosexuality is the societal norm, we assume all males are straight until proven otherwise. A casual reading of *The Great Gatsby* does nothing to contradict such an assumption; we pass over the clues Fitzgerald leaves for us because we’re not looking for them. I am gay, and I missed the clues each of the first four times I read the book. On the fifth reading, however, the incident with Mr. McKee grabbed me like a hook; after that, I became more attentive, and a pattern began to emerge. More and more of the ambiguities I
previously found inscrutable began to merge harmoniously. Jordan’s odd masculinity, and Nick’s weird attachment to her in spite of his ambivalence toward her mind and her body. The reason Nick would seem so reliable when speaking of others, but prove unreliable when speaking of himself. The puppy-dog loyalty for a man he barely knows.

In 2007, the thinking and the behaviors of a gay Nick Carraway might seem insanely introverted and pathetically self-loathing. But this makes it still more difficult to recognize that his thinking and his behaviors are dead-on accurate in the context of 1920s America. And they are.