

ENGL 120D Paper 2: A Lesson on Friendships

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Both *The Great Gatsby* and *Passing* each have one character who could be considered “chips off the same block” if looked at together. Both characters exhibit some of the same qualities and act in similar ways. Gatsby is the character from *The Great Gatsby*, while Clare is the character under investigation from *Passing*. Both books have something to say about the friendships that aren’t mutually agreed upon, and through examining the similarities between these characters closely we can examine exactly what message the books have to substantiate this theory.

Both characters routinely run silly risks. Irene uses this precise wording when she is talking with Clare about Clare’s idea of moving to Harlem (Larsen 46). Gatsby’s silly risk is his deep involvement with getting material wealth through bootlegging (Fitzgerald 61). It is these silly risks that help define both Gatsby and Clare.

Despite these silly risks both characters still gain friendships throughout their stories. The friendship Clare gained is with Irene using the excuse of visiting her children, creating an odd kind of friendship between the two of them (Larsen 57). Irene may have wanted to stop these playroom visits, but deep down must have liked this odd friendship because she never ended the visits (Larsen 57). For Gatsby friendships were created during the parties he regularly threw. Specifically, he made friends with Nick right after introducing himself at the first party of his Nick attended (Fitzgerald 48). Gatsby’s introduction to Nick consists of Nick having a whole conversation with him before it is clear Nick doesn’t know he’s conversing with his host and Gatsby has to say “I’m Gatsby” in response to Nick saying how unusual the party is for not having seen their host so far into it (Fitzgerald 48).

Both Gatsby and Clare have an almost pet-like relationship with Nick and Irene. Gatsby's constant "old sport" line, along with his invitation to Nick to use his beach (Fitzgerald 52), is how we see this relationship with Nick exposed. For Clare we see this relationship depicted in the use of the term "catlike" when describing Clare's personality (Larsen 2). This shared quality lets us see just how reliant on others these characters are.

We see this reliance expand towards the end of both books. Neither Gatsby nor Clare lives through to the end of their stories. Clare appears to have fainted out a window, dying upon impact on the ground far below (Larsen 79) while Gatsby ends up getting murdered (Fitzgerald 161). Irene was stunned by Clare's death, unable to even follow the crowd at the party down to the ground floor (Larsen 80). Simply for lack of a better person to play the role, and because he lived next door, Nick ended up holding down the fort of Gatsby's estate after Gatsby died (Fitzgerald 165); at least until Gatsby's father showed up (Fitzgerald 167). As a result both Irene and Nick came away from the deaths with guilt on their conscience. These endings to Gatsby and Clare are their ultimate reliance on their friendships.

The most problematic aspect of this reliance is that their friendships aren't mutually agreed upon. Neither Irene nor Nick is enthusiastic about these revived friendships (revived because both recent friendships are based on ones from years past that had long since ceased). After Clare's fall we see clearly that Irene doesn't feel very bad about the situation, and is in fact amazed and almost incredulous (Larsen 80). There is ambiguity in the story, but perhaps even the possibility that Irene played a direct role in Clare's fall. With Nick we get the impression that he

cringes every time Gatsby uses the refrain “old sport”, a sign that the friendship is a strain on him and not something he benefits from. Both Gatsby’s and Clare’s reliance on these one-way friendships is a byproduct of their hopes to return to the past instead of live in the present to create a mutually beneficial future.

All this evidence of how Gatsby and Clare are chips off the same block has been focused on their relationships with friends. That is because when you dig into these stories through the lens of these characters you find that they have something to say about the friendships that aren’t mutually agreed upon. We see that both Gatsby and Clare had been friends with Nick and Irene, but fell out of their lives for one reason or another. During the time they were separated Gatsby and Clare at least appeared to maintain their interest in those friendships, but neither Nick nor Irene had desire to reinitiate them. As both stories progress they each outline similar aspects of this relationship, and illustrate the potential tragic ending of these relationships.

Ultimately my theory of these stories is that when read together they offer an interesting example of the dynamics of friendships that aren’t mutually agreed upon. The exact meaning behind that lesson will be different for everyone, but I see the need to be cautious about living in the past when confronted with the present when it comes to friendships as resonating for me. This reading comes from the close looks at both Gatsby and Clare side-by-side. Separately both books have elements of this lesson, but only together do they display it.

Closely reading just one of the two books under investigation wouldn’t turn up the same theory. Nor, quite likely, would comparing any other pair of characters

from these two books. One could argue that a comparison of Nick to Irene would turn up the same results, but with the same details not being focused on Gatsby and Clare the meaning inferred would be different. Both stories independently have versions of this theory, but it is through the recognition of the similarities between Gatsby and Clare that we are presented with those theories combined to show us this embedded message about friendships.