Deception

Edited by
Timothy R. Levine
foundation, a significant number of George W. Bush’s supporters have continued to believe both these assertions.

For propaganda to be successful in its transmission and influence, the collusion of deception at all levels is required. The sender must engage in misleading or false messaging, and the source of this message may be enhanced or obscured. The gatekeepers must transmit the message in such a way that its credibility and believability is preserved or enhanced, and the recipients must be open to the misleading or false message.

Marcus Patterson
Michael Milburn
Christopher Monteiro
University of Massachusetts, Boston

See Also: Advertising, Consumer Products; Authoritarian States; Contagious Disease Outbreaks; Disasters; Drugs; False Advertising; Government, Decline of Public Trust in; Greenspan, Alan; Hitler, Adolf; Iraq War; Korean War; Nazi Propaganda; News Media: Print; News Media: Television and Radio; Nixon, Richard; Spin, Political; Stalin, Josef; Watergate; Vietnam War; World War II.

Further Readings


Great Gatsby, The

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby has been widely hailed as the quintessential American novel, yet essence is precisely what proves elusive in Jay Gatsby and the supporting cast. Trusting their dreams more than their experiences, they trade the substance of reality for hollow representations of an ideal. According to literary critic Harold Bloom, Gatsby’s “refusal to surrender to reality” destroys him, “yet it also gives him his peculiar greatness.” An examination of self-deception in Jay Gatsby, Tom Buchanan, and Nick Carraway reveals distinct incongruities between belief and reality that shape the psychological core of the novel: hypocritical prejudice (Nick), base elitism (Tom), and grand delusions (Gatsby).

Nick Carroway

Narrator Nick Carroway’s language “is consistently seen to work against the demands of veracity,” according to critic Barbara Will. While keenly attuned to duplicity in others, he is blind to his own shortcomings and biases. For
example, after starting a relationship with professional golfer Jordan Baker, Nick casually reveals a “vague understanding” with a girl back home that should be “tactfully broken off.” The reader connects this off-hand remark to his earlier—now suspicious—denial of an engagement. While lying to other characters and misleading the reader, the narrator takes pride in believing himself, “one of the few honest people [he has] ever known.”

Valuing sophistication over truth, Nick respects other liars who are convincing and ridicules those who are awkward. He admires the sister of Tom’s mistress for brazen lies displaying “a surprising amount of character” and appears similarly unconcerned when Jordan cheats at golf, musing that “dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply.” In stark contrast, Nick scorns Jay Gatsby’s “threadbare” yarns, mocking his alleged ruby collection and Oxford education. The reader’s perception of the Gatsby characters is doubly clouded, first by their own falsity and second by the narrator’s distortions.

**Tom Buchanan**

Nick’s college friend Tom Buchanan deceives himself in a more sinister way. A wealthy graduate of an elite university, he fancies himself a man of superior breeding, the defender of old-fashioned values. However, Tom’s racist, misogynistic rants display neither refinement nor morality, and beneath the shallow veneer of a gentleman, Tom is a brute who cheats on his wife, beats his mistress, and participates in a murder.

Tom’s “arrogant eyes” seek any opportunity for advantage, even when his wife, Daisy, accidentally runs over his mistress with her suitor Gatsby’s car. When Nick observes the married couple deep in conversation ("anybody would have said that they were conspiring together"), he infers that Tom precipitated Gatsby’s murder by manipulating the dead mistress’s armed and anguished husband. Like a petulant child whose toy has been broken, Tom views his actions as “entirely justified.”

**Jay Gatsby**

The grandest delusions of all are reserved for Jay Gatsby, a “self-made man” in two senses. From humble beginnings (“Mr. Nobody from Nowhere”), he has amassed great wealth. He has also reinvented his public persona, creating an identity so full of contradictions that even he cannot distinguish who he is from how he presents himself. Having changed his name from James Gatz to Jay Gatsby, he “sprang from his Platonic conception of himself.” As one Fitzgerald scholar has observed, “Jay Gatsby is the creation of James Gatz, a fictional identity or incognito which is at all times threatened by reality; yet in the end James Gatz comes to seem less real than Jay Gatsby.”

Gatsby appears as a magician cloaked in mystery, repeatedly “vanishing” from view, presiding over carnival-style “amusement park” fêtes, driving a “circus wagon,” and flashing cards and photographs linking him to prestige, money, and power. He is rumored to be a killer, an Oxford scholar, and a German spy. A party guest dubs him “a regular Belasco,” after the Broadway producer David Belasco, who used faux scenery praised for its realism. By drawing this comparison, Fitzgerald suggests the elaborate set of Gatsby’s mansion, and even his carefully cultivated life, are no more authentic than stagecraft.

In spurning truth as the descriptive reality of how things are, Gatsby devote himself to the hopeless pursuit of truth as an ideal—how things could be. Before publishing the novel, Fitzgerald deleted a passage from Gatsby’s childhood, which he later wrote into the short story “Absolution.” The child protagonist in this story is described as one who, “like all those who habitually and instinctively lie,” has an “enormous respect and awe for the truth.”

As an adult, Gatsby has transformed his unbalanced esteem for the truth-as-ideal into an equally disproportionate obsession with Daisy. Daisy appears as a dream without substance, defined and redefined by the men who love her. If she leads Gatsby on, it is only by being too passive to shatter his delusion that she will leave Tom for him. His dash toward their unattainable future recalls, in its bittersweet purity, the pursuit of the American Dream.

The last step in Fitzgerald’s exploration of self-deception lies in the final reinvention of Gatsby as hero and comrade. Gatsby the fraud, the bootlegger and adulterer for whom Nick professed “an unaffected scorn,” has, in the narrator’s eyes, “turned out all right at the end.” Without any act of redemption, he becomes “worth the whole
damn bunch put together.” Nick illustrates this about-face dramatically when he erases an unspoken, obscene word scrawled on the steps of the late Gatsby’s mansion, embracing Gatsby’s fantasy. A sweeping nostalgia breathes this wishfulness into the reader, whom Nick invites to take Gatsby’s place, reaching for “the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter . . .” If Daisy is the elusive American Dream, Gatsby, according to Lionel Trilling, “comes inevitably to stand for America itself.”

Amanda Levis
Zoe Chance
Yale School of Management

See Also: Fiction; Infidelity; Magic Tricks; Men; Racism; Self-Deception; Self-Justification.

Further Readings:

Greenspan, Alan

Alan Greenspan was chairman of the Federal Reserve Board from August 1987 until January 2006. A Republican and free market advocate, Greenspan was often accused of straying across the line of political neutrality that his predecessors had observed. Some referred to him as a “political hack” who put the interests of his party before those of the country. For example, Greenspan’s White House visits varied depending on the sitting president’s political party. During Bill Clinton’s second term, Greenspan met with the Democratic president roughly 12 times per year; in George W. Bush’s first term, Greenspan met with the Republican president roughly 53 times per year. Greenspan’s discussions of and explanations about the health and direction of the economy were often confusing, and he was often accused of being deliberately ambiguous—an accusation that he did not try to refute.

As a young man, Greenspan set his sights on a career as a jazz musician, but his ability with mathematics and a fascination with the philosophy of Ayn Rand led him to graduate work in economics at New York University (NYU). He left NYU without submitting a dissertation in order to found Townsend-Greenspan, a consultancy firm he would preside over from 1954 to 1987. He chaired President Gerald Ford’s Council of Economic Advisers (CEA) from 1974 to 1977 and the National Commission on Social Security Reform from 1981 to 1983.

One of the key functions of the Federal Reserve chairman is to predict how the economy is going to perform. Greenspan, however, had never proven to be particularly adept at such forecasting. The following examples illustrate how Greenspan missed the target.

When the Federal Reserve ranked firms on their forecasting abilities, Townsend-Greenspan came in last.

In January 1973, four days before the Dow Jones began a two-year slide losing 46 percent of its value and throwing the country into a two-year recession, Greenspan confidently told the *New York Times* that investors could be particularly “bullish” in their approach to the stock market.

In 1985, two years before he was appointed to lead the Federal Reserve, Greenspan wrote a letter to federal regulators in support of Lincoln Savings and Loan. He argued that the savings and loan was being run in exemplary fashion by Charles Keating and that it was making sound investments. As such, it presented no risk to the Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corporation (FSLIC). In reality, Lincoln was involved in massive fraud, was seized by regulators in 1989, and Keating was sent to prison.