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Sailing Towards Success

In these times of uncertainty, it becomes all too easy to give up hope, to surrender our dreams, and obstinately blame our apathetic mentality on the contemptuous forces of nature we cannot control. In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald describes the story of a man who was able to achieve monetary success against all odds, despite living in a society designed to see him fail. Throughout his novel, Fitzgerald uses boats as a symbol for hope, emphasizing that—despite seemingly insurmountable barriers—dreams are never completely unattainable.

Throughout the story, Fitzgerald intertwines boats with the fate of Jay Gatsby, a man who embodies the classic rags-to-riches story, to portray boats as a means for achieving dreams and thus as beacons of hope. At the beginning of Chapter VI, Nick describes some of the tales about Gatsby that prompted an “ambitious young reporter from New York” to ask Gatsby if he had any statement to give out:

[T]here was one persistent story that he didn’t live in a house at all, but in a boat that

looked like a house and was moved secretly up and down the Long Island shore. (97)

Unlike those who inherit “old money” from well-established families, Gatsby’s wealth and thus his mansion are the result of his following of a dream. By using his mansion as an allegory for that dream, Fitzgerald draws parallels between the “up and down” movement of Gatsby’s house and his movements towards and away from his goals. For Gatsby, turning his house into a boat enables him to “secretly” sidle closer to his dreams; thus it is a boat that gives him hope he can

attain those dreams. Fitzgerald further reinforces the connection between boats and dreams through Gatsby's transformation from James Gatz—a penniless young man—to the prodigal Great Gatsby:

It was James Gatz who had been loafing along the beach that afternoon in a torn green jersey and a pair of canvas pants, but it was already Jay Gatsby who borrowed a rowboat, pulled out to the *Tuolomee*, and informed Cody that a wind might catch him and break him up in half an hour. (98)

Throughout the novel, Fitzgerald uses this image of a boat fighting against the forces of nature to emphasize the seemingly futile struggle towards attaining one's dreams. Fitzgerald employs nature as an allegory for the powerful external forces that push back against the realization of one's goals. Gatsby, however, is able to overcome these forces—in this case the wind that threatens to destroy Dan Cody's yacht—and in doing so furthers his own dreams. In this passage, Fitzgerald employs diction like “loafing” to illustrate the hopeless situation of James Gatz before he sees Dan Cody's yacht. To Gatz, Dan Cody's boat embodies hope and “represent[s] all the beauty and glamour in the world” (100). It is Dan Cody's boat—and its predicament—that gives James Gatz hope and enables him to realize the dream of Jay Gatsby.

Towards the end of his novel, Fitzgerald uses the image of a boat moving against the forces of nature to illustrate how achieving one's dream is a gradual, but not impossible, process. Towards the beginning of Chapter VII, just before Gatsby and Tom come out into the open about Daisy, Nick is with Gatsby at Tom's home in East Egg where they look out on the languid bay:

I went with [Tom and Gatsby] out to the veranda. On the green Sound, stagnant in the heat, one small sail crawled slowly toward the fresher sea. Gatsby's eyes followed it

momentarily . . . Slowly the white wings of the boat moved against the blue cool limit of the sky. Ahead lay the scalloped ocean and the abounding blessed isles. (118)

In this passage, Fitzgerald employs personification, describing the sail as “crawling,” and diction like “stagnant” to illustrate the slow and seemingly futile struggles towards attaining one’s dream. Fitzgerald uses metaphorical language and diction like “against” and “limit” to illustrate all of the external pressures preventing one from achieving one’s dreams. The sky is limitless; it is an inviolable force of nature impossible to overcome. And yet despite all these factors working against this boat’s movement, it is still able to “slowly crawl” towards those “abounding blessed isles.” Fitzgerald then builds on this imagery in the final lines of his magnificent novel:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us.

It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . .And one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (180)

Similar to his description of the sailboat crossing the Sound, Fitzgerald uses diction like “recedes” and “eludes” to paint an image of dreams—represented in Gatsby’s case by the green light—that move away faster than one can move towards them. In this passage, Fitzgerald emphasizes how individuals, despite a current that pushes them “ceaselessly into the past” and dreams “that year by year recede . . . before [them],” continue to have hope that, over time, they can “run faster [and] stretch . . . farther” to ultimately realize those dreams. Fitzgerald then relates these hopeful individuals to “boats against the current” and, in doing so, confirms boats as a symbol for hope.

In his novel *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald—through Gatsby’s origin story and the image of a boat overcoming the forces of nature—conveys boats as a motif for hope. Fitzgerald’s use of

boats emphasizes how one should always have hope—and thus can always be working towards a dream—regardless of any seemingly insurmountable barriers. This idea is especially important during these uncertain and difficult times, when that which we cannot control seems to control everything we previously could. Fitzgerald reminds us that, no matter our circumstances, there is always hope for improvement.