Boats against the current

This extract, from the last pages of the novel, starts with Gatsby's funeral; Daisy, the woman he had loved so deeply, and her husband, Tom Buchanan, are not present. Only Gatsby's father, Mr Gatz, and the narrator, Nick Carraway, mourn him. The passage is a sort of epilogue, a final comment on the loneliness of Gatsby's life and the futility of his dream.

About five o'clock our procession of three cars reached the cemetery and stopped in a thick drizzle beside the gate – first a motor hearse, horribly black and wet, then Mr Gatz and the minister and I in the limousine, and, a little later, four or five servants and the postman from West Egg in Gatsby’s station wagon, all wet to the skin. As we started through the gate into the cemetery I heard a car stop and then the sound of someone splashing after us over the soggy ground. I looked around. It was the man with owl-eyed glasses whom I had found marvelling over Gatsby’s books in the library one night three months before.

I’d never seen him since then. I don’t know how he knew about the funeral or even his name. The rain poured down its thick glasses and he took them off and wiped them to see the protecting canvas unrolled from Gatsby’s grave. I tried to think about Gatsby then for a moment but he was already too far away and I could only remember, without resentment, that Daisy hadn’t sent a message or a flower. Dimly I heard someone murmur ‘Blessed are the dead that the rain falls on’, and then the owl-eyed man said ‘Amen to that’, in a brave voice.

We straggled down quickly through the rain to the cars. Owl-eyes spoke to me by the gate.

‘I couldn’t get to the house,’ he remarked.
 ‘Neither could anybody else.’

‘Go on!’ He started. ‘Why, my God! they used to go there by the hundreds.’ He took off his glasses and wiped them again outside and in.

‘The poor son-of-a-bitch,’ he said.

 [...] 

Even when the East excited me most, even when I was most keenly aware of its superiority to the bored, sprawling, swollen towns beyond the Ohio with their interminable inquisitions which spared only the children and the very old – even then it had always for me a quality of distortion. West Egg, especially, still figures in my more fantastic dreams. I see it as a night scene by El Greco, a hundred houses, at once conventional and grotesque, crouching under a sullen, overhanging sky and a lustreless moon. In the foreground four solemn men in dress suits are walking along the sidewalk with a stretcher on which lies a drunken woman in a white evening dress. Her hand, which dangles over the side, sparkles cold with jewels. Gravely the men turn in at house – the wrong house. But no one knows the woman’s name, and no one cares.

After Gatsby’s death the East was haunted for me like that, distorted beyond my eyes power of correction. So when the blue smoke of brittle leaves was in the air and the wind blew the wet laundry stiff on the line I decided to come back home.

 [...] 

One afternoon late in October I saw Tom Buchanan. He was walking ahead of me along Fifth Avenue in his alert, aggressive way, his hands out a little from his body as if to fight off interference, his head moving sharply here and there, adapting itself to his restless eyes. Just as I slowed up to avoid overtaking him he stopped and began frowning into the windows of a jewelry store. Suddenly he saw me and walked back holding out his hand.

‘What’s the matter, Nick? Do you object to shaking hands with me?’

‘Yes. You know what I think of you.’
‘You’re crazy, Nick,’ he said quickly. ‘Crazy as hell. I don’t know what’s the matter with you.’

‘Tom,’ I inquired, ‘what did you say to Wilson that afternoon?’ He stared at me without a word and I knew I had guessed right about those missing hours. I started to turn away but he took a step after me and grabbed my arm.

‘I told him the truth,’ he said. ‘He came to the door while we were getting ready to leave and when I sent down word that we weren’t in he tried to force his way upstairs. He was crazy enough to kill me if I hadn’t told him who owned the car. His hand was on a revolver in his pocket every minute he was in the house – He broke off defiantly.

‘What if I did tell him? That fellow had it coming to him. He threw dust into your eyes just like he did in Daisy’s but he was a tough one. He ran over Myrtle like you’d run over a dog and never even stopped his car.’

There was nothing I could say, except the one unutterable fact that it wasn’t true.

‘And if you think I didn’t have my share of suffering – look here, when I went to give up that flat and saw that damn box of dog biscuits sitting there on the sideboard I sat down and cried like a baby. By God it was awful –’

I couldn’t forgive him or like him but I saw that what he had done was, to him, entirely justified. It was all very careless and confused. They were careless people. Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made...

I shook hands with him; it seemed silly not to, for I felt suddenly as thought I were talking to a child. Then he went into the jewelry store to buy a pearl necklace – or perhaps only a pair of cuff buttons – rid of my provincial squeamishness forever.

Gatsby’s house was still empty when I left – the grass on his lawn had grown as long as mine. One of the taxi drivers in the village never took a fare past the entrance gate without stopping for a minute and pointing inside; perhaps it was he who drove Daisy and Gatsby over to East Egg the night of the accident and perhaps he had made a story about it all his own. I didn’t want to hear it and I avoided him when I got off the train.

I spent my Saturday nights in New York because those gleaming, dazzling parties of his were with me so vividly that I could still hear the music and the laughter faint. I did hear a material car there and saw its lights stop at his front steps. But I didn’t investigate. Probably it was some final guest who had been away at the ends of the earth and didn’t know that the party was over.

On the last night, with my trunk packed and my car sold to the grocer I went over and looked at that huge incoherent failure of a house once more. On the white steps an obscene word, scrawled by some boy with a piece of brick, stood out clearly in the moonlight and I erased it, drawing my shoe raspingly along the stone. Then I wandered down to the beach and sprawled out on the sand.

Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes – a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder. And as I sat there, brooding on the old unknown world, I thought of Gatsby’s wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was
already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the right.

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 – tomorrow 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.

### LITERARY COMPETENCE

#### VOCABULARY

1. **READ** the text and match the highlighted adverbs of manner with their meaning.
   
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adverb of Manner</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>in a challenging way</td>
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<td>not clearly</td>
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<td>clearly</td>
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<td>harshly</td>
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<td>involving a sudden change of direction</td>
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<td>completely</td>
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#### COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2. **READ** about Gatsby’s funeral in lines 1-22 again. Make notes about
   - the time;
   - the cars;
   - the weather;
   - the people;
   - the narrator’s thoughts;
   - the epitaph.

3. **READ** lines 24-70 again and say whether the following statements are true or false. Correct the false ones.
   - The narrator is still fascinated by the East.
   - He pictures West Egg to himself as a grotesque painting.
   - The people in the East are happy and concerned.
   - The narrator looks forward to speaking to Tom Buchanan.
   - Tom’s behaviour is very polite.
   - Wilson had gone to Tom’s house to kill him.
   - Tom thinks that Gatsby had run Myrtle over.
   - The narrator knows it was not true.
   - Tom had moved to the flat he used to share with his mistress Myrtle.
   - The narrator sympathises with Tom.

4. **READ** lines 71-106 again and answer the following questions.
   - What was Gatsby’s house like when Nick left?
   - Why does Nick spend his Saturday nights in New York?
   - What does he mean when he says that ‘the party was over’?
   - What does he find when he visits the house for the last time?
   - Where does he go after that? What does he think about?
   - What was Gatsby’s failure according to Nick?
COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

5 CHOOSE from among the following to define the narrator, Nick Carraway. Tick as appropriate.

☐ The story is told from his point of view.
☐ He is involved in the action.
☐ He observes and comments upon the action.
☐ He is omniscient.
☐ He is objective and detached.
☐ He is the author’s moral conscience.

6 FOCUS on the use of tenses and say whether the story is narrated in chronological order. Why do you think Fitzgerald chose this type of narrative?

7 ANALYSE the character of the man with owl-eyed glasses.
   1 Has he got a name? What does the narrator call him? Are we given a physical description?
   2 The narrator just describes his actions. Underline them and try to explain their meaning.

8 FOCUS on Tom Buchanan. Make notes about
   • his way of walking;
   • his head;
   • his eyes.
   How would you describe his character?

9 WRITE down the phrases from the text referring to Daisy and say what kind of person she is.

10 FIND the dominant image in the lines devoted to the funeral. What atmosphere does it create?

11 FOCUS on the symbols in the text.
   1 Point out the signs of power Gatsby has surrounded himself with.
   2 What image stands out as the symbol of his hopes and dreams?
   3 The myth of the ‘American Dream’ is introduced by means of a comparison. Point out its terms and try to explain its meaning.

12 SAY what Gatsby and Nick stand for.

COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS

13 COMPARE The Great Gatsby and Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (→ 6.16) as regards
   • the narrative technique;
   • the figure of the narrator;
   • the hero;
   • the author’s aim.

COMPETENCE: LINKING LITERATURE TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

14 DISCUSS. How important are dreams and illusions in a man’s life? Do you think it is possible to devote a whole life to fulfilling a desire?