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A.P. Language and Composition
Period 2, Mr. Bye

A Defunct Dream

In The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald, narrator Nick Carraway participates vicariously in the title character's romantic dream without having to pay the consequences. Because Nick also possesses a demanding imagination, he desperately wants Gatsby to succeed. However, Nick's close observations of Gatsby and Daisy's reconciliation contain clues foreshadowing the dream's ultimate failure.

Nick perceives Gatsby as a man with something to hide. Would Gatsby have his "hands in his pockets" if he felt confident about bringing Daisy back into his life? Probably not. The hands-in-pocket image also conjures up someone holding his change. Gatsby's means of obtaining his money—his underground enterprises with Meyer Wolfsheim—must remain a secret from Daisy. Even the way Gatsby talks, "muttering" instead of speaking plainly, suggests that he lacks the confidence to communicate with Daisy openly and honestly.

Attempting to hide his true identity, Gatsby projects a false image. He is in fact exceedingly nervous and invested in his dream, but Gatsby wants Daisy to believe he is relaxed and even bored. Consequently, he "reclines" in a "strained counterfeit of ease." Gatsby's need to disguise his real feelings reveals an ominous gap between him and the human object of his dreams. Moreover, Fitzgerald's choice of "counterfeit" over "fake" draws attention to the source of Gatsby's corruption: money obtained illegally. Gatsby cannot let the object of his dream guess at the means he exploited to approach her, so he unsuccessfully tries to present himself as a gentleman of the leisure class.

Nick sees the cracks in Gatsby's upper-class image. An attempt at a refined laugh proves “abortive”; Gatsby's desire to give birth to his dream results in a miscarriage of intention. Instead of moving confidently, Gatsby's fingers are “trembling” and instead of resting comfortably, he sits “rigidly.” This is not the body language of an emboldened man whose dream is proceeding on course. He is afraid of the real Daisy who threatens his fantasy.

As if Gatsby's flaws aren't ominous enough, Nick discovers that Daisy falls short of the perfect person residing only in Gatsby's imagination. If Gatsby fully approved of what he saw, Nick wouldn't describe the eyes that behold Daisy as “distraught.” Far from seeing a perfectly “graceful” goddess, those eyes look at a woman who is also frightened. Instead of satisfying Gatsby's wish for an eternal love, Daisy sits on the “edge” of a “stiff” chair. Apparently, Daisy feels just as awkward as Gatsby; her posture implies that she doesn't intend to stay long. The Daisy who vaguely comments, “We haven't met for many years” is no match for the obsessively focused Gatsby who pinpoints the length of their separation: “Five years next September.”

Perhaps the most telling clues that Gatsby's dream will collapse are Nick's observations of the mantelpiece clock. Instead of “broken,” he describes the clock as “defunct.” This unusual word calls attention not only to the timepiece, but also to Gatsby's entire dream. Time seems to stand still in Nick's living room just as Gatsby mistakenly believes that he can stop time everywhere to secure Daisy for himself. In addition to their defunct quality, both the clock and Gatsby's dream “tilt dangerously” due to the impossibility of stopping time or—even more absurd—repeating the past. So dangerous is Gatsby's insistence on flouting reality that the dream, unlike the clock, is destined to “[smash] to pieces.”

How tragic that Nick can see the seeds of destruction in Gatsby and Daisy's reconciliation. This observant narrator can reserve judgment, but he does not withhold the truth.