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Practice exam question

Questions or answers?

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Guidance for the question on p. 33 of the magazine.

The opening of an answer

The narrative perspectives of American novels can be skewed, leading readers to believe they are discovering answers rather than being asked questions. Nick Carraway, the narrator of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), interprets the self-invented Gatsby for the reader, yet he avoids fixed judgements of him. Similarly, the focaliser in Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), Irene Redfield, appears secure in her life as a middle-class African American but her fascination with the beautiful Clare Kendry, who threatens conventional categories in passing as white and marrying a White Supremacist, distorts her perspective. Irene's sense of her own good judgement appears unassailable until her thoughts fragment in the Finale, leading to the novel's ambiguous ending. Charles Lewis argues that the two novels share much territory: '[T]he main character is a passer closely observed by another admiring but ambivalent character whose relationship with the passer is fraught with tension and ambiguity, whose own position [...] similarly entails an element of passing'. Apparent certainties abound in both novels but as soon as we detect the omissions, the deceptions and the gaps, we realise that these American novels pose crucial questions about identity, class, money and race, but many of their answers are elusive and open to debate. By contrast, *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck's 1939 bestseller, published ten years after the Wall Street Crash and following the Great Depression, is a direct attack on capitalism and the lies it offered Americans, raised on the high ideals of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence (1776) that promised equality for *all* men. The novel's intercalary structure means that the Joad family's existence is never seen in isolation. Their journey to California to seek work is set side-by-side with a socialist reading of the wider picture, for which Steinbeck drew on his research for a San Francisco News series about the plight of migrant workers in California during the Great Depression. The novel's structure provides the reader with clear answers, unlike the much more ambiguous narrative methods of *The Great Gatsby* and *Passing*.

The questions *The Great Gatsby* and *Passing* ask but don't quite answer about America echo James Baldwin's view of its 'rich confusion'. He wrote:

'The very word "America" remains a new, almost completely undefined and extremely controversial proper noun. No one in the world seems to know exactly what it describes, not even we motley millions who call ourselves Americans'. (1959)

In some ways the two novels do not avoid the harshest of answers and refute Baldwin's struggles with definition. The shocking sight of Myrtle Wilson's left breast 'swinging loose like a flap' after the road accident (Chapter VII), and Irene and Brian's bitter dispute sparked by reading about a lynching in the evening paper, over whether their boys should be made aware of racism or protected from it – ('If, as you're so determined, they've got to live in this damned country, they'd better find out what sort of thing they're up against as soon as possible' (Part 3 Finale, Chapter Four)) – make explicit the writers'

bleak views of America in the postwar, Prohibition 1920s, with economic disaster looming. As Tony Tanner argues of Fitzgerald, 'He *wants* to show America desecrated, mutilated, violated'. The ugliness of Jack Bellew's racism and the danger of Clare's whole existence confirm that this is also true of Larsen's approach in *Passing*. Yet the narrative avoidance, omissions and strange slips in and out of focus in both novels prevent the reader from arriving at fixed readings of the main characters. Even establishing who *is* the main character in each novel – Gatsby and Clare or those from whose perspective we view them, Nick and Irene – reveals the reader's conundrum.

In the opening pages, Fitzgerald signals that the reader would do well to reserve judgement on Nick, just as he is 'inclined to reserve judgment' on others himself. Not only does his privilege and inflated family pride make us suspicious (just as Irene's snobbery and racism about her servants make us mistrust her), but he admits his own weakness in a part-boast: 'Reserving judgment is a matter of infinite hope'. He confesses that he wanted to put 'riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart' aside; the First World War put paid to his earlier indulgent habit. But importantly, he makes an exception for Gatsby:

'Only Gatsby, the man who gave his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction – Gatsby who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn'.

The repetition of the name in the same sentence plus his doubled fictional status – not only is he the title of the novel that Nick is writing, but it is also not his name – stirs unease. He is James Gatz of South Dakota, a fact that Nick does not reveal until Chapter VI. His 'unaffected scorn' set on one side, Nick makes his first attempt to define Gatsby, as if partly in love with him – 'there was something *gorgeous* about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life' [my italics]. Coupled with this overblown, clichéd writing is a jarring note, 'as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away', a strange metaphor of exactness in the face of devastation. This is the first of the novel's disjunctive modernist images (often of advertisements, films, cars and money) that has echoes of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) – that Fitzgerald apparently knew off by heart. For example, 'The Game of Chess' opens with opulence: 'The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne, / Glowed on the marble', but shifts to imagery of death and decay: 'I think we are in rat's alley / Where the dead men lost their bones' (lines 77–78, 115–116), reminding readers of the valley of ashes in Chapter II.

An early sign that Fitzgerald does not shy away from identifying the flaws in the 'vast carelessness' of the very rich is Nick's account of the alarming dinner at Tom Buchanan's in the fashionable East Egg, when even the insistence of the phone ringing (Jordan explains to Nick it is 'some woman' of Tom's) is terrifying. Nick describes Tom's body as 'of enormous leverage – a cruel body' and he is racist: 'It's up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things'. But around Gatsby, Nick casts a miasma of deception and illusion and his uncritical fascination for him (as when he eagerly pimps Daisy to him in his house in Chapter V) does not flag. The whole structure of the novel is a series of gaps, as if to underpin it with uncertainty. For example, we never know what Gatsby and Daisy talk about in this early re-encounter. Nick also shifts material around to fit his own narrative, even admitting in Chapter VI:

'He told me [his story of the transformation into Gatsby] very much later...he told it me at a time of confusion, when I had reached the point of believing everything and nothing about him. So I take advantage of this short halt, while Gatsby, so to speak, caught his breath, to clear this set of misconceptions away' (Chapter VI).

In true Jamesian style (an early reviewer compared the novel to Henry James's *Daisy Miller*), 'There is the story of one's hero, and then, thanks to the intimate connexion of things, the story of one's story itself'. The two stories – of *Gatsby* and the story of Nick trying to write that story – leave us uncertain whether to admire or despise the pair of them. Tanner hails this as 'the undoubted magic of the book and its irreducible polyvalency. Call it undecidability', suggesting that its refusal to give answers is part of its fascination for the reader.

Commentary

The answer addresses the terms of the question head-on in a critical and evaluative way, exploring how the narrative approaches of *The Great Gatsby* and *Passing* pose questions rather than answer them. The focus is firmly on the two main texts, with *The Grapes of Wrath* only introduced as part of an exploration of the contexts of American literature. This offers a contrasting reading of the question, allowing the candidate to develop their opening and to acknowledge that American literature cannot be simplified. The candidate notices that Steinbeck is writing his novel in the late 1930s rather than the pre-Crash 1920s, perhaps explaining the much more political nature of the novel that leaves the reader in no doubt that capitalism is to blame for the poverty of the Joads and millions like them.

The use of critical readings and contexts is a strength of this answer. The Charles Lewis argument allows the candidate to explore *The Great Gatsby* and *Passing* in parallel, with a tight focus on Nick and Irene, through whose eyes we watch Gatsby and Clare. Drawing on the voices of other American writers – such as James Baldwin and Henry James – allows the answer to explore distinctly American readings of America and storytelling itself, rather than relying on critics alone. When the essay embarks on a new argument – that the two novels do not shy away from being decisive in some ways – the condensed and powerful quotation from Tony Tanner encapsulates a sense of the two writers' bleak vision of the so-called land of the free. As is typical of the strongest responses, critical readings and contexts emerge from the argument of the essay, rather than the other way around.

The essay is truly comparative in that it engages with the two novels both in the introduction (essential to any comparative essay) and in the first paragraph of the body of the essay. The weighting after that is skewed to *The Great Gatsby*, but the central part of the essay would go on to tackle *Passing*, bringing in comparisons and contrasts, with a similar focus on what remains unexplained and open to interpretation in that novel, especially in its final pages. *The Grapes of Wrath* would perhaps only appear again in the conclusion of the essay, or possibly earlier to contrast the unsettling endings of *Passing* and *The Great Gatsby* with a brief discussion of the very powerful and moving final moments of Steinbeck's novel, quite unlike the ambiguity of the other two.

The critical authority of this answer is in evidence throughout the part-answer. For example, the quotation from *The Waste Land* offers us a helpful way of exploring *The Great Gatsby* in its modernist context. The argument develops persuasively, leading the reader through its ideas skilfully. The distinction it draws between the ways in which *Passing* and *The Great Gatsby* address questions of the abuse of power head-on (in the characterisation of Jack Bellew and Tom Buchanan) and the much more ambiguous exploration of the main characters is a nuanced one. Overall, this answer shows a consistently detailed understanding of the texts and their contexts, with detailed comparative analysis.

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