

**AP® ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION
FREE-RESPONSE QUESTIONS**

**ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION
SECTION II
Total time—2 hours**

Question 1

(Suggested time—40 minutes. This question counts for one-third of the total essay section score.)

The English Department at Buena High School is considering making one novel for each grade level “core reading,” meaning that every single student in every single English class will read that particular book. For the eleventh grade, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* has been selected as the novel that all Buena juniors will be required to read; however, there has been a great deal of discussion about whether or not *The Great Gatsby* is worthy or relevant enough to be the required reading for eleventh-grade students at Buena High School.

Carefully read the following six sources, including the introductory information for each source. Then synthesize information from at least three of the sources and incorporate it into a coherent, well-developed essay that evaluates whether or not *The Great Gatsby* should be required reading for eleventh-grade students at Buena High School.

Your argument should be the focus of your essay. Use the sources to develop your argument and explain the reasoning for it. Avoid merely summarizing the sources. Indicate clearly which sources you are drawing from, whether through direct quotation, paraphrase, or summary. You may cite the sources as Source A, Source B, etc., or by using the descriptions in parentheses.

- Source A (Donahue)
- Source B (Honan)
- Source C (Rothman)
- Source D (Test Scores)
- Source E (Schulz)
- Source F (“Numbers”)

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Source A

Donahue, Deirdre. "Five Reasons 'Gatsby' Is the Great American Novel." *USA Today*. Gannett, 07 May 2013. Web.

The following is from an article published in USA Today after the release of the 2013 film adaptation.

Here are five reasons why *The Great Gatsby* should rank as The Great American Novel:

1. It's the most American of stories. Encoded at the very center of our national DNA is admiration for the self-made success story, the mythic figure who pursues and fulfills his dream — someone like Jay Gatsby, a "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere" who rises from obscure poverty to immense wealth.

"It's the Great American Dream," says Jeff Nilsson, historian for the bimonthly *The Saturday Evening Post*. "It is the story that if you work hard enough, you can succeed."

Leading Fitzgerald scholar James L. W. West III agrees. He calls *The Great Gatsby* "a national scripture. It embodies the American spirit, the American will to reinvent oneself." West says it is no coincidence that *The Great Gatsby* is probably the American novel most often taught in the rest of the world. "It is our novel, how we present ourselves. ... He captured and distilled the essence of the American spirit."

Yet *Gatsby* also explores the dream's destructive power. "Americans pay a great price for that dream," says Nilsson.

The Great Gatsby also captures money's power to corrupt, to let the rich escape from the consequences of their actions. Here's Fitzgerald's description of that original 1% couple: "They were careless people — Tom and Daisy — they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money ..."

2. The romance of the Roaring '20s. Fitzgerald was the poet laureate of what he named "The Jazz Age," the most raucous, gaudy era in U.S. history. "The 1920s is the most fascinating era in American culture," says Nilsson. "Everything was changing so much." Youth in revolt didn't start at Woodstock, it began with Gertrude Stein's "Lost Generation." It was flappers, cars, sex, movies, gangsters, celebrities, a stock market minting money, everything awash in illegal booze. The wildest parties and bad behavior among the rich and famous today have nothing on the you-only-live-once hedonism depicted in *The Great Gatsby*.

3. It remains relevant. West, an English literature professor at Pennsylvania State University, has been teaching the book to college students for decades. He marvels how "it never seems to lose its modernity; it has that kind of staying power." Distracted as they might be by other classes, not to mention hormones, his students "really do bear down on this novel ... It becomes 'their novel.' It's an unfailing delight to teach."

One reason: It offers complicated characters who can be interpreted in fresh ways for new readers. Is Nick in love with Gatsby, as Greg Olear theorized on *Salon*? Could Gatsby — the other, the outsider — actually be a black man? Often dismissed as a selfish ditz, is Daisy victimized by a society that offers her no career path except marriage to big bucks?

[DONAHUE ARTICLE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1]

At a recent press conference, the actor who plays Gatsby noted its relevancy today. "It is one of those novels that is talked about nearly 100 years later for a reason," says DiCaprio who first read *Gatsby* when he was 15. "It's incredibly nuanced and it's existential and at the center of this movie is this man who is incredibly hollow."

4. Crazy love. What makes Gatsby magical is his motivation. Although he's made his fortune as a bootlegger and gambler, greed doesn't drive him. Rather he's on a quest to reclaim Daisy. Still, *The Great Gatsby* isn't a romance about how a nice millionaire almost wins back the girl of his dreams. It's about a narcissistic obsession with the past. To Gatsby, Daisy isn't a married woman with a daughter. She's an object, something he lost and wants back. Which makes his actions — such as buying a mansion across the water from the Buchanans so he can stare at the green light at the end of their dock — well, kind of creepy and stalker-like.

5. Imperishable prose. Forget the critics, the theories, even the characters. For Fitzgerald's fans, it's the language. "Fitzgerald had a pitch-perfect ear," says West. "There's not one flabby sentence," says Nilsson. For evocative beauty, what can ever beat the last line of *The Great Gatsby*, which is engraved on the Rockville, Md., grave the author and his wife Zelda share. "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

Source B

Honan, Daniel. "Is The Great Gatsby the Most Overrated Literary Novel of All Time?" Big Think. The Big Think, Inc., 24 May 2013.

The following is an excerpt from an article published on the website "The Big Think" in 2013.

Call it *The Great Great Gatsby debate*: some critics dismiss the book as a celebration of a shallow, money-obsessed culture, while *Gatsby*-boosters are quick to point out that through his narrator, Nick Carraway, Fitzgerald manages to maintain critical distance. Both views, I think, are partially correct, but they still only scratch the surface of my *Gatsby* aversion, a deep-seated disdain that is hard to pinpoint precisely (I believe Fitzgerald possessed, in Lionel Trilling's phrase, "a taste for the aristocracy," a quintessentially American characteristic that I don't begrudge him, but I also see no sort of Balzacian social consciousness or Shakespearean disinterestedness in *Gatsby*).

So what's my ultimate beef with *Gatsby*?

For those of us who dislike *Gatsby*, perhaps it stems from reading the book as rebellious high school students who rejected it then because we didn't like *anything* that was force-fed to us. Indeed, *Gatsby* is one of those rare books that is considered sacrosanct in a culture where books are "borderline irrelevant," as 5-time *Gatsby* reader/sufferer Kathryn Schulz astutely notes. And yet, *Gatsby* somehow occupies a kind of hallowed ground as the crowd-pleasing "great American novel," which only serves to further annoys us...

And so, in respect to issuing measured judgment, perhaps we should not consider *Gatsby* as the most overrated literary novel of all time. As Jason Gots quite rightly points out, *Gatsby* is "totally acceptable as a minor, artsy romance." So why not read it that way? I think I will.

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Source C

Rothman, Joshua. "The Serious Superficiality of The Great Gatsby." *The New Yorker*. Conde Nast Digital, 13 May 2013.

The following is an excerpt from an article published in The New Yorker in 2013.

Baz Luhrmann's [film adaptation of] "The Great Gatsby" is lurid, shallow, glamorous, trashy, tasteless, seductive, sentimental, aloof, and artificial. It's an excellent adaptation, in other words, of F. Scott Fitzgerald's melodramatic American classic. Luhrmann, as expected, has turned "Gatsby" into a theme-park ride. But he's done it in exactly the right way. He hasn't tried to make the novel more respectable, intellectual, or realistic. Instead, he's taken "The Great Gatsby" very seriously just as it is.

"Gatsby" is hard to pin down. On the one hand, it's broadly understood as a classic American novel, which suggests that it must have important things to say about the twenties, money, love, and the American dream. On the other, it seems self-evidently to be about style over substance. It's short (only a hundred and fifty pages); its plot is absurd; and it examines only the thinnest wedge of American life. It was poorly received when it was published, and it continues to be an object of skepticism. In 1950, in Lionel Trilling predicted that Gatsby's story would lose its magnetism... And yet, all the while, "Gatsby" has grown more beloved and resonant. Today the novel, like Gatsby himself, seems suspicious.

It's popular because we still live in that atmosphere today. Fitzgerald's novel is cool, sexy, stylized, and abstract; there's a dreamlike falseness, a hollowness, an unreality to it, and that apparent superficiality is part of what makes it fascinating. It's modernist and European without being arty. The best moments in the novel have the devious, carnal sophistication of high fashion; the characters seem unreal, but are also unforgettable. And, for all its strangeness, it also possesses a glamorous, crowd-pleasing commercialism.

Source D

Buena High School. Great Gatsby Test Scores. 23 Mar. 2015. Raw data. Buena High School, Ventura.

The following is data from Great Gatsby test scores at Buena High School.

Class/Score	Average Score on Final Test
AP Class 1	71.1%
AP Class 2	75.0%
AP Class 3	80.3%
CP Class 1	81.4%
CP Class 2	91.1%
CP Class 3	84.0%
CP Class 4	84.3%
OVERALL AVERAGE	81.0%

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Source E

Schulz, Kathryn. "Why I Despise The Great Gatsby." *Vulture*. New York Media LLC, 06 May 2013. Web.

The following is an excerpt from an article published in New York Magazine in 2013.

I have read *The Great Gatsby* five times. The first was in high school; the second, in college. The third was in my mid-twenties, stuck in a remote bus depot in Peru with someone's left-behind copy. The fourth was last month, in advance of seeing the new film adaptation; the fifth, last week. There are a small number of novels I return to again and again: *Middlemarch*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *Pride and Prejudice*, maybe a half-dozen others. But *Gatsby* is in a class by itself. It is the only book I have read so often despite failing—in the face of real effort and sincere intentions—to derive almost any pleasure at all from the experience.

I know how I'm supposed to feel about *Gatsby*: In the words of the critic Jonathan Yardley, "that it is *the* American masterwork." Malcolm Cowley admired its "moral permanence." T. S. Eliot called it "the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James." Lionel Trilling thought Fitzgerald had achieved in it "the ideal voice of the novelist." That's the received *Gatsby*: a linguistically elegant, intellectually bold, morally acute parable of our nation.

I am in thoroughgoing disagreement with all of this. I find *Gatsby* aesthetically overrated, psychologically vacant, and morally complacent; I think we kid ourselves about the lessons it contains. None of this would matter much to me if *Gatsby* were not also sacrosanct. Books being borderline irrelevant in America, one is generally free to dislike them—but not this book. So since we find ourselves, as we cyclically do here, in the middle of another massive *Gatsby* - recrudescence, allow me to file a minority report.

Source F

"'The Great Gatsby' by the Numbers." *USA Today*. Gannett, 07 May 2013. Web.

The following is an excerpt from an article published in USA Today in 2013.

When F. Scott Fitzgerald died of a heart attack in 1940 at age 44, he had sold fewer than 25,000 copies of *The Great Gatsby*. Today, the now-classic 1925 novel is his publisher Scribner's most popular title. A staple on high school reading lists, it's a perennial on USA TODAY's Best-Selling Books list. And thanks to the buzz surrounding Baz Luhrmann's new film adaptation starring Leonardo DiCaprio, opening Friday, it's currently the second top-selling book in the USA.

- **No. 2:** Current ranking on USA TODAY's Best-Selling Books list
- **403:** Total number of weeks on list
- **25 million copies:** Copies sold worldwide
- **500,000:** Number of copies sold annually
- **42:** Number of translations into different languages
- **450,000:** Copies printed of the blue-jacket trade paperback edition in 2013
- **415,000:** Number of copies in print of the new movie tie-in edition, released April 23
- **185,000:** Copies of the e-book sold in 2013

END OF EXAM