

Possible Exam questions – *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Great Gatsby*

1. Janie’s voice is of paramount importance to this novel. Critics constantly refer to “the figure of Janie Crawford – powerful, articulate, self-reliant, and radically different from any woman character they had ever before encountered in literature...a woman who wasn’t pathetic, wasn’t a tragic mulatto, who defied everything that was expected of her, who went off with a man without bothering to divorce the one she left and wasn’t broken, crushed and run down” (Washington ix). So, do you agree? Is Janie’s character all of these things? Is her voice compelling? How does the free indirect discourse supply her voice with “self-consciousness” and power? Explain, being careful to define your terms and provide good examples. (hint – read the pdf on free indirect discourse)
2. How might the following quote be used to explain one of the over-arching themes of the novel? (question requires that you define what that theme **is**)

“When God had made The Man, he made him out of stuff that sung all the time and glittered all over. Then after that some angels got jealous and chopped him into millions of pieces, but still he glittered and hummed. So they beat him down to nothing but sparks but each little spark had a shine and a song. So they covered each over with mud. And the lonesomeness in the sparks makes them hunt for one another, but the mud is deaf and dumb. Like all the other tumbling mud balls, Janie had tried to show her shine” (Hurston 86).

3. Janie’s definitions of love and marriage appear to be a major focus of the novel. Her first experience with love comes from an observation of nature – the pear tree scene of Ch. 2:

“She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid.” (11)

How does this first experience define love and marriage for her? How well do her experiences match up to her understanding? How does she continue to “seek confirmation of the voice and vision” (11)?

4. The hurricane is a massive natural force in the novel that gives us the title *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: “The wind came back with triple fury, and put out the light for the last time. They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against the crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God” (Hurston 151). What might the hurricane symbolize? What does the title mean? How does it “title” the novel as a whole?

5. What is the anthropological importance of the novel? What did Hurston do with poetic literature that hadn't been done before? How does it demonstrate Hurston's creation of a black female voice? Explain, using examples. (hint – read foreword and afterword and the pdf on “Signifyin”)
6. In what ways does Janie violate typical gender boundaries? How could some of her words or actions be seen as masculine? How might men view this as a threat?
7. Discuss Nick Carraway's character. How reliable is he as a narrator? What aspects of his character make him an effective narrator? How does his point of view color the reality of the novel, and what facts or occurrences would he have a vested interest in obscuring?
8. Nick says that Gatsby "represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn," and yet he also says that Gatsby "turned out all right at the end," and he tells Gatsby that he is "worth the whole damn bunch put together." With these quotations in mind, analyze Nick's attitudes toward Gatsby.
9. Modernists, as we know from our study of Hemingway, "break up the narrative continuity," and/or "depart from standard ways of representing characters," and/or "violate the traditional syntax and coherence of narrative language" and/or thematically represent an "immense panorama of futility and anarchy." Using just two of these definitions, how can we see Fitzgerald as a modernist? (hint – don't worry about characterization, but the other three are very provable)
10. One critic has written that "the theme of *Gatsby* is the withering of the American Dream." Write an essay which outlines the evidence you can find in the novel which supports this contention. Consider Gatsby's dream, Nick's appreciation of Gatsby's capacity for hope, and the eventual downfall of Gatsby.
11. *The Great Gatsby* is laden with symbolism, from the obvious green light and spectacles to geography, automobiles, weather and color. Explain the use (not just the meaning) of any three symbols in the novel as they support theme.
12. Using the following quote by Prof. Matthew J. Bruccoli, a Fitzgerald scholar, explain how *The Great Gatsby* can be read as social criticism. Be specific about what is criticized (for example, issues of class, race, or gender) and be sure to support with quotations from the text.

Fitzgerald ebulliently proclaimed in 1920 that "An author ought to write for the youth of his generation, the critics of the next, and the schoolmasters of ever afterward." Although this edict - perhaps a prophecy - was triumphantly fulfilled by *The Great Gatsby*, the novel was written by a man of his own time about his time. *The Great Gatsby* was published in 1925; therefore many of its details now seem as remote as those in the world of Charles Dickens's

fiction. Great fiction is great social history; Fitzgerald's work has become automatically identified with an American decade: The Jazz Age (which he named) or The Roaring Twenties or The Boom. Since *The Great Gatsby* is the defining novel of the Twenties, which have become trivialized and vulgarized by people who weren't there, it is necessary and useful to provide a corrective assessment of that era and Fitzgerald's response to it. The Twenties were not a ten-year binge during which everybody got rich and danced the Charleston in speakeasies while drinking bootleg hooch. Certainly the reaction to America's participation in World War I - which ended on 11 November 1918 - triggered disillusionment, moral re-evaluation, social experiment, and hedonism. Although Fitzgerald joined the parties and chronicled them, he wrote in judgment. The Twenties were primarily an era of possibilities and aspiration a dominant Fitzgerald theme. In "Echoes of the Jazz Age" he wrote: "It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire."

from the 1992 preface to *The Great Gatsby* by Matthew J. Bruccoli

13. Dreams and how they are and are not realized are important in both of the novels. Read the following poem by Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston's contemporary in the Harlem Renaissance (and onetime writing partner). Use this poem as a lens to "see" *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Great Gatsby*. How does it apply to each work? Be specific!

Harlem

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

14. Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) was an African American poet and precursor to the Harlem Renaissance. His poetry would have been familiar to both Fitzgerald and Hurston. Read the poem below, "We Wear the Mask." Use this poem as a lens to "see" the characters in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Great Gatsby*. How does it apply to each work? Be specific!

We Wear the Mask

WE wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.
We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!