

English 11/AP English Language and Composition  
Passages, Rhetorical Devices, and Themes

Your task is to choose one of the themes we had discussed and to attach to it two passages that support it. Here's an example of how to look at passages to determine how the writing of the piece supports the theme.

Theme: the American dream

Passage:

He stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward – and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock (20-21).

Commentary:

We have talked about the symbol of the green light, but we also want to examine the writing itself. Fitzgerald establishes here a dream-like tone—it's early in the novel and we are interested in the dream as dream-like—through syntax. How? The first sentence is balanced: it's two independent clauses and some modifiers, including a noun clause at the end. The second sentence is a **loose** sentence, with the subject and verb at the beginning and modifiers flowing from there. The effect is dream-like.

The use of sound tropes also affects the tone: Here **consonance** of t's and the play of “minute” and “might” also, through their affinities in sound, add to the dream-like tone.

Passage:

He smiled understandingly—much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced—or seemed to face—the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey (48).

Commentary:

Like the first passage, this one is also written in the comforting, soft tone that allows for the magic of dreams. The passage relies on repetition and more loose sentences. The first sentence repeats “understandingly” and is a loose sentence. The second sentence begins a series of three sentences that begin with “it” and a verb; the repetition of this grammatical structure, known as **anaphora**, especially in a set of three, conveys completion. There is another triplet in the last sentence, where Fitzgerald conveys with this sense of completion what the smile does. With the emphasis on and development of the image of the smile—emblematic of Gatsby's total belief in the dream—the passage conveys a sense of the dream's magic. That the image is of a smile is important, too, as the passage suggests that this dream is not only available to Gatsby, the smiler, but also to the recipient of the smile.