

2026 AP Language, Summer reading synthesis packet.

Read. Take notes. Use these sources to support your ideas.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde illustrates how society's reverence for physical beauty can shape privilege, morality, and power. Contemporary culture, too, often connects appearance with social advantages or disadvantages. Plan an essay that argues **your position on the extent to which physical beauty impacts social and economic privilege.**

Use appropriate evidence from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, other works you have read, and/or your own observations and experiences to develop your argument.

Source A: (Wilde) - *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Source B: (Russell) - "[Looks aren't everything. Believe me, I'm a model.](#)" *Ted*.

Source C: (Alam) - "[The Socioeconomics of the Pretty Privilege.](#)" *Psychology Today*.

Source D: (Yong) - "[Pretty People Really Do Have It Better](#)," *Time*.

Source E: (Travers) - "[A Psychologist Explains The 'Pretty Privilege' Paradox](#)," *Forbes*.

Source F (Robson) - "[The Surprising Downsides of Being Drop Dead Gorgeous](#)," *BBC*.

Source C:

In the fabric of social interactions, the subtle yet pervasive forces of the halo and horn effects sculpt our perceptions and experiences, often unbeknownst to us. These cognitive biases, which attribute a person's external beauty to positive or negative internal qualities, profoundly influence the socioeconomic landscapes of individuals. This phenomenon, known colloquially as "pretty privilege," does not merely sway fleeting personal interactions but also steers long-term life opportunities and outcomes.

"Pretty privilege" refers to the societal advantage that individuals perceived as physically attractive gain over others. This concept is not just a social or cultural observation. A wealth of psychological research supports it, indicating that attractiveness can influence judgments about a person's character, intelligence, and professional capabilities. These effects are grounded in two well-established psychological phenomena: the halo effect and the horn effect.

The Halo Effect

The halo effect occurs when one positive attribute of a person—often their physical attractiveness—leads people to make blanket positive evaluations of that person. When the halo effect is in play, attractive individuals are usually automatically ascribed traits such as intelligence, kindness, and integrity without substantive evidence. This cognitive shortcut can lead to significant disparities in how individuals are treated in various settings.

The Horn Effect

Conversely, the horn effect occurs when a negative attribute leads to unduly harsh overall judgments about a person. In the context of physical attractiveness, those perceived as less attractive might be unfairly viewed as less capable, less intelligent, or less friendly, which can lead to prejudice and discrimination in social, professional, and academic environments.

Socioeconomic Implications of Pretty Privilege

The repercussions of these biases are far-reaching, influencing socioeconomic status through several pathways: Research has consistently shown that attractive individuals are more likely to be hired, receive higher starting salaries, and be promoted more frequently. This is particularly pronounced in customer-facing industries, where appearance can influence consumer perceptions. The halo effect can create self-fulfilling prophecies in which attractive individuals receive more opportunities to succeed, enhancing their skills and experiences.

Attractiveness can affect social mobility. Individuals who benefit from pretty privilege might have access to better social networks, which can open doors to opportunities and resources that are less accessible to others. This networking advantage can lead to better job offers and educational opportunities, reinforcing socioeconomic stratification.

Studies have also suggested that kindergarten through college teachers may give preferential treatment to students they consider more attractive. This can affect the grades awarded, encouragement, and opportunities afforded to these students, potentially impacting their educational trajectories and future income levels.

In legal settings, the halo effect can impact the severity of sentencing. Attractive individuals are likely to receive more lenient sentences, while those suffering from the horn effect experience harsher outcomes. This judicial bias demonstrates how deeply entrenched privilege can be, affecting even the most supposedly objective and rigorous of societal systems.

Source D:

“Pretty” is wholly subjective, of course. When I was growing up in the ’90s, it was mostly defined as being thin, white, cisgender, and feminine. And while that lens has broadened quite a bit now, those markers are still generally the easiest to benefit from if you hit them.

The social advantages of pretty privilege are many: good-looking people come off as smart, capable, trustworthy, and generally morally virtuous. If you’re hot, your dating app matches will never run empty. People will buy you drinks at bars, randomly do nice things for you, give you gifts, and generally go out of their way for you. Economic advantages abound, too: attractive people are more likely to receive raises, promotions, and be heard in the workplace, and the perception of their productivity and value to a company is outsized. There are several studies that examine the power of pretty privilege and the unbalanced life experiences of those who have it. [...]

But there’s a plot twist: an absence of pretty privilege doesn’t necessarily condemn you to a life less extraordinary. People are dynamic, attraction is fickle, and charm, intelligence, and wit will get you a lot further than looks can (even if you have to put more effort in them). Our appetite for beauty demands some variety, and if everyone looks the same then prettiness becomes redundant and boring. Humans aren’t completely shallow, despite unflattering evidence that may suggest otherwise. It’s our experiences and privileges that grant us access to resources for individual resistance; how we’re born into the world and how we’re taught to perceive ourselves determines how much we can cash in on those privileges.

And it turns out that the halo effect works both ways—your personality and behaviors play a big part in how hot people think you are. Being cool, kind, and doing “good things” can change how a person’s attractiveness is perceived, namely by increasing it. Talent bias, wealth bias, good deed bias, [...]—they all contribute to people thinking you’re hotter than the sum of your physical attributes. In one study, subjects were shown images of the same person with different personality descriptors. Images accompanied by verbal descriptions of their generosity and kindness resulted in higher scores of facial attractiveness than when the same images were accompanied by negative traits like selfishness and unfriendliness. Personality perception affects facial attractiveness, as do other contextual elements like prior knowledge of a person and their role in your social community. Generally speaking, good behavior and positive attributes make you more attractive.

Looks do matter—sometimes, a bit too much, it feels like—because they’re a conduit to power. There’s a reason pretty privilege is, in fact, a privilege; it makes life easier by the status it grants. But the thing about beauty is that it often usurps other positive qualities a person might possess. Prettiness is a passive trait, after all. It’s a common assumption that classic hotties must not have had to develop any other redeeming characteristics because beauty is the ultimate redemption. It’s important to remember that hotness and desirability are made up of so much more than the sum of your most desirable physical features. They’re encompassed by a host of nonphysical attributes that contribute to how you’re perceived, including the idiosyncrasies and quirks of your personality.

[...] Plus, with so much applied aesthetics in our faces all the time now, beauty fatigue is real. We crave personality, unique quirks, and the kind of charm that comes from a life less polished. I mean, there’s nothing less cool than conforming to society’s standards, and that includes beauty. Sometimes all it takes is enough time to pass for that thing you were insecure about (freckles, gap teeth, too-thick eyebrows, no eyebrows, scars, et cetera) to have its moment in the limelight, and for you realize that your insecurity doesn’t define who you are. If anything, it proves to you that it’s all made up, and you can release yourself from appearance anxiety, bit by bit as time goes on. Owning your individual quirks and what makes you you is always hot behavior. When I think about what attracts me to people, it’s always something about their outlook on life, their warmth and generosity of spirit, how comfortable they are in their own skin, and the solidness of their presence, which is often some enigmatic thing that tells me they know what’s up. Energy always pulls where beauty falls short.

Source E:

Here are two benefits and caveats of the infamous pretty privilege.

1. A “Pretty” Great Personality

A 2021 study examined the stereotype that “beauty is good” and found that attractive individuals were perceived to have more moral traits than unattractive individuals. Research also shows that attractive individuals are thought to be more trustworthy than others.[...]

Growing up attractive can lend individuals confidence and social skills that make them seem more competent, likable and persuasive. Due to their looks and perceived abilities, social and romantic interactions become more accessible, doors swing open and invitations are readily extended.

However, research shows that attractive individuals can also be perceived as vain. Researchers explain that it is only because of their perceived sociability that moral judgments about them become more balanced.

Additionally, true social connections based on personality and shared interests may be overshadowed by superficial external judgments. Relationships may be initiated for the wrong reasons, leading to a sense of isolation and lack of authentic connection, which is essential for well-being.

On the other hand, a 2022 study also found that if an individual is perceived to be less attractive and less intelligent-looking, they also seem less human to an onlooker. Specifically, less attractive women appeared less human, as did less intelligent men, suggesting a deeper layer of gender bias. These attributions of personality traits become concerning indicators of how individuals with or without pretty privilege might be treated differently, for no fault of their own.

2. A “Pretty” Successful Career

In professional spheres, pretty privilege can be a launchpad for success. Research consistently shows that attractive individuals are more likely to be hired, promoted and receive higher salaries. Their appearance-based confidence also enables them to pursue the wages and opportunities they desire and deserve.

Similarly, a student’s appearance in the classroom can also impact the grades they receive. In a 2017 study, female students earned lower grades in online courses than they did in in-person classes. Similarly, in a 2022 study, the grades of attractive female students declined when offline classes switched to online instruction.

Further, pretty privilege may create an academic or workplace dynamic that fosters discrimination, resentment and discontent. The privileged individual may find success but at the cost of their relationships and, possibly, their mental health.

Research shows that attractive women can experience cognitive dissonance or mental conflict when they benefit from pretty privilege, as they may simultaneously be facing contempt, hostility and a lack of empathy due to their advantages, leading to a decline in their mental health. As much as they may be put on a pedestal, they can be devalued by others for the same reasons.

Pretty privilege may also create an overemphasis on external qualities, leading to the development of an unhealthy relationship with one’s body, based on a pressure to “keep up appearances” or continue receiving validation through beauty. The loss or absence of this privilege altogether fuels inadequacy, social comparison and frustration, highlighting the importance of fostering a more inclusive and diverse definition of beauty as well as emphasizing a person’s true, internal qualities above all else.

At its core, pretty privilege bestows upon individuals a range of social, professional and personal advantages based solely on their physical attractiveness. Research on pretty privilege underscores the need to recognize and value the diversity of human experiences beyond physical appearances. Ultimately, understanding the double-edged nature of pretty privilege is a crucial step towards fostering a society that values individuals for their character and abilities rather than aesthetics.

Source F.

[...] the blessings and curses of beauty have been a long-standing interest in psychology. Do those blessed with symmetrical features and a striking figure live in a cloud of appreciation – or does it sometimes pay to be plain? Combing through decades of findings, social psychologists Lisa Slattery Walker and Tonya Frevert at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte have reviewed all the evidence to date – and their conclusions are not what you might expect.

At the most superficial level, beauty might be thought to carry a kind of halo around it; we see that someone has one good attribute, and by association, our subconscious assumes that they have been blessed in other departments too. “It’s one of many status characteristics that we can identify very early in our interactions,” says Walker.

To psychologists, this is called the “what is beautiful is good” heuristic, but fans of the sitcom *30 Rock* might recognise this as “the bubble”. Jon Hamm’s character is remarkably incompetent, yet manages to live in blissful self-delusion thanks to his good looks. As a doctor, for example, he can’t even perform the Heimlich manoeuvre, but somehow managed to drift through medical school thanks to his natural charm.

According to the available evidence, the bubble is a reality. In education, for instance, Walker and Frevert found a wealth of research showing that better looking students, at school and university, tend to be judged by teachers as being more competent and intelligent – and that was reflected in the grades they gave them.

What’s more, the bubble’s influence inflates over the years. “There’s a cumulative effect,” explains Frevert. “You become more confident and have more positive beliefs and more opportunities to demonstrate your competence.”

In the workplace, your face really can be your fortune. When everything else is considered, more attractive people tend to earn more money and climb higher on the corporate ladder than people who are considered less pleasing on the eye. One study of MBA graduates found that there was about a 10 to 15% difference in earnings between the most and least attractive people in the group – which added up to about \$230,000 (£150,000) over a lifetime. “You are being conferred advantages throughout your life, from your schooldays into the workplace,” says Walker. [...]

But if beauty pays in most circumstances, there are still situations where it can backfire. While attractive men may be considered better leaders, for instance, implicit sexist prejudices can work against attractive women, making them less likely to be hired for high-level jobs that require authority. (If you want Hollywood’s take on this truism, Frevert and Walker suggest that you look no further than Reese Witherspoon’s *Legally Blonde*.) And as you might expect, good-looking people of both genders run into jealousy – one study found that if you are interviewed by someone of the same sex, they may be less likely to recruit you if they judge that you are more attractive than they are.

More worryingly, being beautiful or handsome could harm your medical care. We tend to link good looks to health, meaning that illnesses are often taken less seriously when they affect the good-looking. When treating people for pain, for instance, doctors tend to take less care over the more attractive people.

And the bubble of beauty can be a somewhat lonely place. One study in 1975, for instance, found that people tend to move further away from a beautiful woman on the pathway – perhaps as a mark of respect, but still making interaction more distant. “Attractiveness can convey more power over visible space – but that in turn can make others feel they can’t approach that person,” says Frevert. Interestingly, the online dating website OKCupid recently reported that people with the most flawlessly beautiful profile pictures are less likely to find dates than those with quirkier, less perfect pics – perhaps because the prospective dates are less intimidated. So, as you might have guessed, being beautiful is not a passport to certain happiness – though it helps. Frevert and Walker are keen to emphasise that like our conceptions of beauty itself, these influences are superficial and by no means deep-rooted in our biology, as some might suggest. “We have a whole set of cultural ideals about

beauty that let us say if someone is attractive – and through those same ideals, we begin to associate it with competence,” says Walker. In a sense, it’s just a cognitive shortcut for a quick appraisal. “And like many of the shortcuts we use, it’s not very reliable,” says Frevert. And it could be fairly easy to lessen the impact – if human resources departments give more information about a candidate’s achievements before an interview, for example.

Ultimately, Frevert points out that focusing too much on your appearance can itself be detrimental if it creates undue stress and anxiety – even for those already blessed with good looks. “If you are obsessing about attractiveness, it may alter your experience and interactions,” she says. It’s a cliché, but no amount of beauty can make up for a bad personality. As the writer Dorothy Parker put it so elegantly: “Beauty is only skin deep, but ugly goes clean to the bone.”