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The Contemporary American Dream

California is one of the most diverse places in the world. According to the Public Policy Institute of California, 27% of the population are immigrants, that's 10.7 million people. And in 2000, California became a "minority majority" state, which means that there isn't an ethnic group that makes up over 50% of the population. Yet there's a focus for students read literary classics written dozens or hundreds of years ago by white authors.

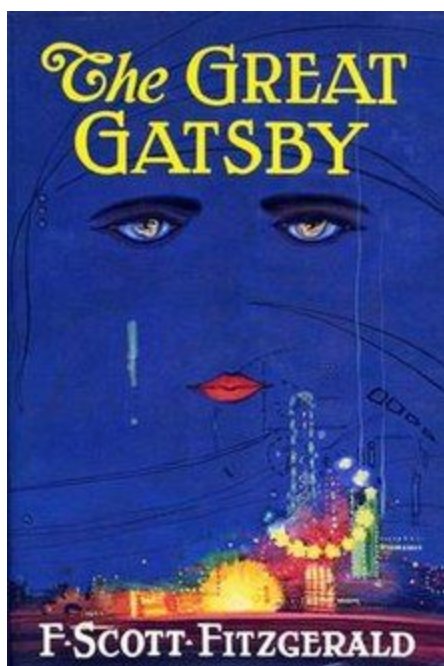
Students should have more exposure to diverse, contemporary writers. To understand more complex social issues and to have a deeper understanding of different perspectives. To be able to pull out universal themes from not only Shakespeare and Fitzgerald, but from works of Amy Tan, Khaled Hosseini, and other diverse authors. Classics are a great way to teach the basis of literary techniques and analysis, but I want students to make use of those lessons when looking at contemporary works.

Students will learn to compare American literature from different time periods, critically analyzing what makes them different or similar. Although diverse contemporary stories differ in premise and setting, there are universal themes that can be read throughout these works. The curriculum will help students learn how American became so diverse and what were the changes of mindset and stuff that developed because of it.

The centerpiece work for this unit is *The Great Gatsby*. Now, how can students relate to Gatsby? He's still a fictional character born and raised on the east coast in the 1900s. And how

has the views of the way you make money changed? In contemporary time, is it better to make money like Gatsby, even if illegally? Or is it better to be given money and taught to invest it like Buchanan? Or are both ways to attain money bad?

Gatsby wanted money, but he wanted to be so rich that people believed it was old money. Students will analyze this type of mindset and critically analyze if this mindset is still prevalent in the 21st century. The goal of this curriculum is to help students understand different perspectives through the learning of universal human themes. What does the American Dream mean in *The Great Gatsby* and what does the American Dream mean in more contemporary and diverse stories?



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Great_Gatsby

Launching the Unit:

What is your definition of the American Dream?

Pick out key words and post them on the board. Discuss what they mean and why students picked those words in particular. At the end of class, I'll record the words then at the end of the unit, after reading *The Great Gatsby* and the other stories and poems, I'll ask the same question again. The same key words might pop up, but other words might as well.

The goal is to expand the limitation of the American Dream—or well, break open the limited definition of the American Dream. Then at the end of the unit, this activity will be repeated and students can compare their original ideas to their ideas after reading *The Great Gatsby* and all the other pieces in this unit.

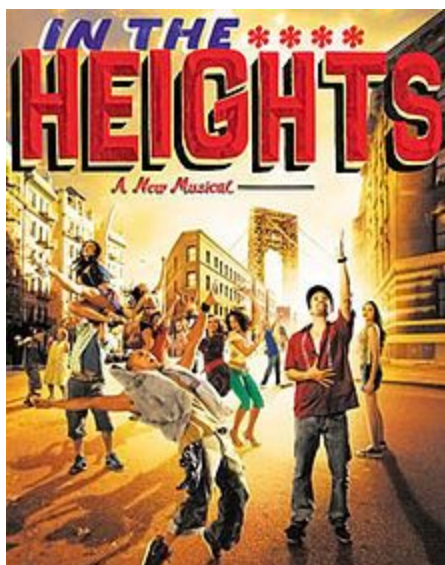
Then start the unit with *In the Heights*. After handing out the lyrics of one or two songs, read through the lyrics and have students analyze then discuss what they think the meaning of the songs are.

The Great Gatsby isn't the most "relatable" novel to many young adults. It takes place a hundred years ago with a cast of white rich people living their lives in New York. However, the theme of ambition resonates with many people, especially teenagers who are planning on attending college, joining the military, or going straight into the workforce.

To make the book more digestible and to help students be able to critically analyze the book, I'll play a song(or a couple songs) from *In the Heights*, a musical by Lin-Manuel Miranda. The main plot of the musical is immigration in America, with the hope that if teenagers can work hard enough, they can be successful enough to raise their families out of poverty. Jay Gatsby has the same motivation; he started out poor on a farm in North Dakota, then climbed his way up the ladder to be rich and successful. Of course his family wasn't the motivation for his success, but that's the difference students should point out. What motivates characters in *The Great Gatsby* vs

characters in contemporary literature and media—these characters being more diverse and perhaps younger than 30+ year old Gatsby.

Some *In The Heights* songs that the students could listen to, then discuss in class about, are "In the Heights" the opening song, and "Everything I Know" performed by the character Nina. Students should be given the lyrics as well so they can closely analyze the writing. Then we can have a class discussion on the meanings of the songs and how the songs exhibit themes of the American Dream. From what students know about *The Great Gatsby*, how do they think the idea of the American Dream has changed from the 1920s to now?



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_the_Heights

Because we're going to be reading *The Great Gatsby* first, students will learn archetypes and themes before tackling the diverse and contemporary short stories that I've planned for later. So they will be able to compare the characters of *The Great Gatsby* to characters of other stories we go over.

First, they'll have to learn what the basic archetypes are and they'll do so by defining it in their notebooks or on worksheets and providing examples of characters in films or pop culture. For example, the archetype of the Lover—students will define it with a couple of lines, then give an example, such as Romeo and Juliet or Belle and the Beast. This will give students a basis and example for when they're reading through *The Great Gatsby* because they'll have to attribute the book's characters with these basic archetypes.

Besides just placing characters in their prospective archetypes, I want students to realize that characters can change and develop traits that might not be within their label. Perhaps characters can exhibit traits of multiple archetypes or evolve from their past archetypal label. Students will determine characters' archetypes before sharing with their peers because they might view characters differently. For one person Jay Gatsby might be the Lover, for another he might be the Seeker or the Hero.

Students will also create their own archetype—they have to explain their reasoning and define their new archetype—perhaps give it an appropriate and unique name as well. This will allow students to look past what's given and develop a more complex and critical role for each of the characters. They'll have to determine what makes the character different from the archetype. Ultimately the goal of this activity is for students to learn that humans, both in literature and in reality, are complex and always changing.

After a couple sessions reading the book, students will decide on which archetype each established character belongs in and whether or not those characters should be placed in a different archetype. Of course this will be followed by discussion and opinion so all the students can have different perspectives and arguments as to why their peers chose similarly/differently.

Besides just learning what archetypes mean, students will be more knowledgeable about each individual character in the book and their role in both the setting of the "Roaring Twenties" and the plot.

Activities with additional Young Adult Literature Selections:

All these stories, aside from "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"(1939), were all published after 1970, the majority of them were published in the 21st century. Hopefully since these stories are shorter and more modern, students will be able to identify with them more easily, allowing for an easier read and for a deeper analysis. The list is in chronological order; however, the stories can be picked out differently depending on how far the students are into *The Great Gatsby*, and depending on which story would complement that section the best.

The whole class can read a story together in a day or two, then everyone can analyze and discuss about all these different stories. Students can see all the different perspectives of both the author and their peers. Students can share their varying opinions about all these stories and the social issues and themes that the stories tackle.

In addition, some of these stories were written by Bay Area authors such as Amy Tan and Viet Thanh Nguyen. Unfortunately Khaled Hosseini, who wrote *The Kite Runner* didn't publish any short stories so he wasn't included. But having students read pieces from writers who grew up where students are growing up right now—that can help the students connect to the piece.

Although all these works take place in different settings and time periods, featuring different characters and culture, are there any universal themes that transcend these differences? Any similar plot points or character traits that you can see throughout all these stories? What are

the motivations for success for us now? I want students to keep these questions in mind when reading these stories. Then we'll discuss in class.

"The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" by James Thurber(1939).

Even though this story isn't a from contemporary author, I've put it in because it exhibits the dream of escaping from a dull life. Both protagonists are stuck in a marriage where their partner is dominant; therefore, the protagonists are unable to experience life the way they want. This is another perspective of the American Dream, one that focuses on living life rather than gaining material wealth. But after reading this story, students can ponder the difference in motivation between Walter Mitty and other characters in *The Great Gatsby*. What drives each character, and why does it differ?

"The Son From America" by Isaac Bashevis Singer(1973).

Samuel, the son who left for America comes back to his small village in Lentshin in Poland, but his family apparently doesn't need his money. This story focuses on family, which is almost nonexistent in *The Great Gatsby*, so discussion of this short story can be more connected to the students rather than the centerpiece. Many students are in school in order to get a degree, go to work and be successful for their families. So how can students compare their own parents to the parents shown in this short story? Why are they similar and why are they different?

"Rules of the Game" and "Two Kinds" by Amy Tan

Both pieces are short stories taken from *The Joy Luck Club*(1983).

Amy Tan is an alumna from SJSU so I wanted to include these stories for students to see that there are people from their own city who are successful and fascinating writers. Her work also touches upon social topics such as immigration and the culture of Asian American people. In both of her works, the girls are under the stress and expectations of their family and they both succeed and fail differently. So what does it mean to be successful as an immigrant? And what are the expectations that are placed upon different people?

"The Paper Menagerie" by Ken Liu(2011)

This is a story about materialism and how attaining that material item can help a kid fit in. Although the protagonist isn't a teenager, he's still a little kid who can exhibit traits that anyone would be able to resonate with. The premise of the story revolves around a Chinese American family trying to fit in to America and with that, there can be so many discussion topics that compare this family's idea of the American Dream to other works that we've read.

"Fatherland" from *The Refugees* by Viet Thanh Nguyen(2017)

How does making money or having money make a person feel more confident? This is a main theme in "Fatherland" and *The Great Gatsby*. Vivien goes to America and fakes her wealth when interacting with her Vietnamese family. How is Vivien's story similar to *Gatsby's* and how is it different?

"Control Negro" by Jocelyn Nicole Johnson published in *Best American Short Stories* 2018

Although this might be too mature for high school readers, or the curriculum, this piece can provide insight into both parenting and unacknowledged racism. The protagonist is a professor who is separated from his son, but he has an agreement with the mother that she guides him down paths that the professor wants. The professor experiments with his son, trying to see just how successful his son has to be in school in order to be given the same treatment as white students. The answer is obvious though; his son has to outperform everyone in order to be given a similar treatment, a similar opportunity.

"Everything Is Far from Here" by Cristina Henríquez published in Best American Short Stories 2018

The main idea to take from this short story is what you can lose trying to succeed in America. There are sacrifices that have to be made in order for a chance to prosper. And sometimes, there are consequences to failing. Again, students will write in their notebooks what they think about this piece and how the protagonist's goals differ from *The Great Gatsby* or other works we've gone over.

"What We Talk About When We Can't Talk About Love" by Andrew Lam published in Reed Magazine No.152

BP is an immigrant from Vietnam who became successful in America. Now he throws parties and tells "stories" about how he escaped Vietnam. BP stands for "Boat People" and the "stories" he told were never the same—they were always jokes—so nobody really knows his true origin. Students could compare his character to Jay Gatsby especially since they both are very

similar, secretive about their poverty-stricken origin, but somehow, they were able to become successful socialites in America.

Concluding Activities:

Jenna Clifford, TEDxGEORGETOWN "The Divided American Dream",

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yKjd2SJZaHQ>

Jenna Clifford is a graduate student at Georgetown University. And in order to complete her master's thesis, she interviewed different students from her hometown. She wanted to see how they decided on what their career/major/college they chose. There were a few students who didn't even attend college because they've been working in a beer factory since high school so they just continued working there. One of those students said his dream was to someday be a manager of that beer factory. Another girl told Clifford that even though she gained a 4.0 GPA and was in a higher academic ranking and had a higher SAT than everyone else in their hometown, she still attended community college, working at a grocery store part-time.

Then discuss coming-of-age stories and ask students if they think these characters are chasing the American Dream as well. Can younger, teenage characters have an American Dream? Can ethnically diverse characters have one as well? Do you guys have one? Is it similar to any of the characters we've read through?

Then ask why.

Why are you planning on going to college? Family motivation? Fear of family? Peer pressure? More money? Or why do you want to go into the career you want to go in? Why are you not going to college?

Although these are hard abstract questions that students can't answer, the purpose of this discussion is to get them to ask themselves these questions. To get them to look more introspectively so they won't hastily determine their future goals, and so they'll know that there's always multiple paths to take—so long as they're able to see it, question it.

Interview Activity:

After watching this Ted Talk, students will start their interviewing activity where they ask their parent(s) or guardian(s) or another family member about their past—find out their origin and their perspective of the American Dream. Preferably students will ask the adults in their family. Students can ask about:

- How and why they immigrated here and/or why they continue living here
- Which college/major/career they decided on or plan on going into

But more importantly, students will be encouraged to let the interview go where it wants to go. It's great to break away from the basic questions I've written. If the person they're talking to has something to say even though it's more than what the question asks, then let them say it.

Ed Mabrey's "Pursuit of Happyness", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwRphYeVraA>.

The narrator speaks about a time he bought a homeless man a sandwich. This is about realism, negativity, and the loss of hope. Mabrey wanted to encourage the homeless man with a movie he remembered watching, *The Pursuit of Happyness* with Will Smith, which was about how a man who lost everything. But he still was able to turn it around and become successful. However, the homeless man's eyes said "Don't you dare." Turning your luck around when you've got nothing—that doesn't work for everyone.

Poetry Activity:

Not everyone has the same opportunity or perspective; *The Great Gatsby* shows this contrast through the difference between old money, new money, and poverty—the difference between Tom Buchanan, Jay Gatsby, and the Wilsons. So after showing this spoken word, and perhaps more poetry if the teacher can find more, students will write a poem of their own.

The students will write found poetry. Students will pick a story that they've connected to and they will read it over, picking out words and phrases that pop out at them. Then they'll place those words together, forming a found poem. Of course they'll be encouraged to make changes as they continue reading. They can use the short stories we've read in class, or a section of *The Great Gatsby*, or any other literature that connect to them. This will be a start-in-class and finish-at-home assignment so the students can look into their personal library for a piece to do the found poetry on. Students will know early on that they have read it outloud in class. Because it's found poetry, it won't be as directly personal to the individual but it'll still exhibit qualities of each students' experiences and perspectives of the works they've read.

Final Essay:

Students will write a comparison essay of roughly 1,000 words. They'll compare a character from *The Great Gatsby* with a character from one of the short stories we've gone over in class. They will put their knowledge of archetypes and historical context to use, arguing both the similarities and differences of the two characters. With this essay, students will show their understanding that although these characters are from different time periods, with different ethnicities, their stories still exhibit the same universal human experiences of ambition and opportunity of the American Dream.

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