

Understanding Identity and the American Dream Through Literature

True meritocracy is unattainable within the United States for people who were not born into riches. The myth that having great determination will lead to financial success is a widespread one within the United States. People from all throughout the world find their way into the U.S. to pursue a better life. While some people do “make it” many are discriminated against because of their gender, sex, sexuality, racial, ethnic, or national background despite their status. This is because personal and systematic prejudices are prevalent in the United States which affect how people are treated.

Chasing the American Dream is a fantasy that can be achieved, but there are numerous barriers that stop average people from joining the born rich millionaires. Such is characterized in *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald as it characterizes the idea of “New Money” versus “Old Money”. This distinction is important because Jay Gatsby is not born from wealth, but attains it which makes him from “New Money”. While he’s obsessed with Daisy, she is an unattainable desire of his as she represents “Old Money” which means that she was born from wealth. Gatsby has acquired the American Dream, but he is not in the same sort of social class as people with “Old Money” are. So, despite his trying to assimilate into their culture of extravagance, he is not the same as they are. (SparkNotes).

While the theme of the unit seems morbid, I am not teaching students that they should pity themselves because of their identity. Instead, my goal is to teach them that they can fight for their right to obtain upward mobility despite their identities. I am not shaming them for their identities, but rather teaching them that their identities do affect how they are perceived. They should be aware of how the world sees them despite how they see themselves. Students will

learn to achieve greatness with their identity. When I write this unit, I have my hometown in mind and the population of mostly Latine/a/o kids with immigrant parents. However, the unit should be applicable to any population.

Unit Introduction/ Into the Unit

The American Dream: Real or Fiction?

This introductory lesson will begin with a central question written on the board: Is the American Dream real? Can it be obtained by anyone? The students will be given 5-10 minutes to discuss on their own time. Then a cartoon will be presented:



A song, along with a lyric page, will be given to the students: *7,000 Miles* by Ruby Ibarra which is a song that Mike Tinoco, a teacher I observed, used to illustrate a similar concept to his 10th-grade students. The song details Ruby Ibarra's upbringing as the daughter of an immigrant as well as commentary on the American Dream. I chose this song as it connects with a YA pairing (*American Born Chinese*) that the students will read later in the class. After students examine both texts, a follow-up question will be asked: Has your perception of the American

Dream changed after examining the cartoon and the song? Students can raise their hands and answer the question.

Historical Introduction

Students will be introduced to the Jazz Age, the era in which *The Great Gatsby* takes place. At this time, Rich people are at their peak as the U.S. economy caters to them. Whereas 40% of Americans lived in poverty (Crash Course “The Roaring 20’s”). Wealth disparities are an important part of the Jazz age and also affect the idea of “Old Money” and how “New Money” is viewed. This would be done via a Crash Course video with a set of vocabulary and concepts that students must be familiar with before delving into *The Great Gatsby*.

Through the Text

Song Activity

I will be using the song “C.R.E.A.M (Cash Rules Everything Around Me)” by Wu-Tang Clan. The song illustrates the artists’ hardened life from teenage to twenty-two in order to chase a living. First, the song will be introduced as a poem to the students. Which is inspired by our “Rap or Poetry” lesson in 112B. Then, students will be given a handout to examine the lyrics as we read aloud in class. They will then highlight important lyrics that examine the hardships of black youth as illustrated in the song. The format of this song lesson was inspired by how Jessica Canton formatted it in her Unit of Study. However, I made my own alterations to make it my own.

- What is the song warning against? Look at the last two verses.
- What images of hardship is present? What is the cause of the struggles?

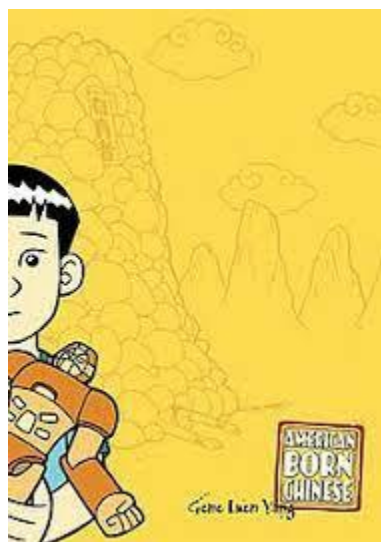
- Why is the chorus repeated and emphasized?
- How has money affected the speaker(s)? How old were they?
- Example lyrics are: “No question, I would flow off and try to get the dough all / Stickin’ up white boys in ball courts” and “Cash rules everything around me / C..R.E.A.M., get the money / Dollar dollar bill y’all”.

Then, the song will be played over the loudspeakers as they follow the song to help them identify how Wu-Tang Clan sing about their hardships.

- After hearing the song, what stands out differently?
- In what tone do the Wu-Tang Clan members rap the song?
- What lyrics does the song itself highlight?
- What is your impression of the song?

Analysis of this song will be used to highlight the themes around *The Great Gatsby* where Cash, Money, does rule everything around the characters in the novel. The song also emphasizes how money can affect youth, especially disenfranchised youth. Despite the song’s age, the message translates the idea that money and chasing the wealth that the American Dream promises can result in dangerous situations. Just like how Gatsby acquired his money illegally to reach the promises of the American Dream. As the song describes, money brings Gatsby hardships.

American Born Chinese



American Born Chinese is a graphic novel by Gene Luen Yang that narrates the life of three characters: The Monkey King, Jin Wang, and Chin Kee. Although I have not read the entire book yet, I've read a good chunk of it. I would use the book to show how people from different cultures try to assimilate into American culture but are often rejected because of their background. This is true with The Monkey King as he tries to assimilate into how gods "should be" and tries to change his loyal subjects based on what he's been taught is correct. The young adult aspect comes into play with Jin Wang, a Chinese-American boy who has internalized hate for his Asian heritage. I want to include this as a pair to read intermittently alongside *The Great Gatsby* as, like Jay Gatsby, Jin Wang has a strong desire for something he cannot truly attain. He wants to achieve assimilation and whiteness as described in the Chin Kee storyline. The novel

also has a good message for young adult readers navigating life with their diverse racial/ ethnic identities.

Reading the Text

The Great Gatsby is a relatively short book with a page count of 208. I want to be able to read in class so that I know that students are at least getting some of the novel's context since out-of-class reading is hard to dictate. I want to read around 1 chapter per class which would account for 9 days to read the 9 chapter book. Since I cannot evaluate the pace/ how long my classes will be I hope this would be possible. I have a 55-minute class period in mind right now since that is what I'm used to.

American Born Chinese would be introduced at the end of each class period since it is an easy book to get through. Although I am a senior college student, it took me around 15 minutes to get to page 50 of the novel. It is not hard to get through, so I expect to finish the book within 5 days if each period is given the last 15 minutes to read the book.

Each class period will be given different prompts each day to write their thoughts about our readings. For example, one day could have: What is Jin Weng's issue with his identity? Another one could be: "Does Gatsby fit in with his lavish lifestyle?"

Since we are reading in class, I don't expect reading quizzes to be required. However, I'm unsure of how much Gatsby we can read in a class period, so I'm welcome to change. If I do, I would incorporate reading quizzes for comprehension's sake. I'd also consider a small summary presentation at the start of class so students who don't read the assigned reading have some context to the day's lesson.

Of course, a discussion will be implemented in class to talk and analyze the book, characters, themes, and symbols.

Group Activity

An activity that could work well is having four groups (around 5 students each) split evenly to talk about each book. So, there would be a character anatomy chart that involves some sort of visual component where students can draw the character they are comparing while also labeling aspects of their characters. Once the groups finish designing their assigned character (either *Gatsby* or Jin Weng), the class will come together to note similarities and differences in a Venn diagram. Inspired by the article “Let the Creativity Bloom” by Leticia Pitre from the YA Wednesday website. The article is from December 22, 2021

Group Assessment

A group project of the student’s choosing will be assigned. However, students will be given multiple options as to what form they want their assignment to be in. Inspired by the article “Let the Creativity Bloom” by Leticia Pitre from the YA Wednesday website.

- A graphic novel adaptation summarizing the main themes of *The Great Gatsby* the work will be requested to be set in contemporary times with the group’s setting of choice.
- A short story adapted from *The Great Gatsby* set in contemporary times. (better if individual)
- A short film that can also summarize the main themes of *The Great Gatsby* (Contemporary with the setting of choice)
- Thematic Poster series: Students will be asked to exemplify the main theme from *The Great Gatsby* in poster form.

Final Assessment

A timed in-class mini-essay will have students compare and contrast the happenings in *American Born Chinese* and *The Great Gatsby*. I expect the students to have a lot of resources for this essay based on our previous work. The final essay will be an open-book exam.

Beyond the Text

The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas (not read)

This book follows a Sixteen-year-old girl named Starr Carter who sways between her poor neighborhood and fancy prep school. She soon witnesses her best friend's murder at the hands of a police officer. Protests occur and Starr struggles with seeking justice for her friend's murder. (goodreads.com)

I think that this book would be valuable for students to read alongside or after our unit to illuminate how different people desire something much like Gatsby, but are met with multiple barriers to achieving success. Such is the case for this novel as it details how simple things, apart from the American Dream, are not easily attainable by disenfranchised people. This book showcases Exeter Quality numbers 3, 6, and 7 as the book reflects current social issues, especially police brutality and the black lives matter movement. As well as having a strong female protagonist. The book explores themes true to the real world and challenges structures at play in the United States. The book is also heavy in emotion.

We Were Here by Matt de La Peña (read)

This book follows Miguel, a struggling teen who is placed in a group home after he commits an unspeakable crime. Miguel runs away from the group home with two other boys to run away from his problems and live a peaceful life in Mexico. However, Miguel comes to find his sense of self and come to terms with his past.

I think that this book is valuable to young adult readers in context with our unit as Miguel also desperately desires to be rid of his problem, but finds that his solution is his own self-acceptance. He begins his healing journey on his own time rather than on other people's. The book displays Exeter Qualities 2, 4, and 6 by providing an exciting plot full of secrecy about Miguel's crime. Although Miguel's experience is not typical, his story has important themes of desire, self-identity, and acceptance that teens will find helpful. The book also touches on themes relevant to the wider world such as youth in the justice system.

Homegoing by Yaa Gyasi (read)

This novel is a multigenerational narrative that intertwines issues within Ghana and the United States for Black people. The book follows the family tree of two sisters separated at birth whose families live different lives. It is a piece of historical fiction that tackles big historical events in the U.S. and in Ghana.

This book can supplement the student's learning about the unit as it primarily details the hardships that Black people face. Despite being Americans, Black people are "othered". Because the book also details different time periods, the 1920s Harlem Renaissance is included and can be a chapter I can highlight when recommending the book to students in conjunction with *The Great Gatsby*. *Homegoing* is a heavy book and not YA, but it does have a fair share of children/

teens per chapter as well as ending with two teens healing their family's trauma at the very end of the novel. The book displays all 8 of the Exeter Qualities which should really engage young readers. However, this book is more well-equipped for a 16-17-year-old. This book will further knowledge of the American Dream by showing how deep-rooted systematic oppression is in the United States, making it difficult for disenfranchised people to move forward as easily as white people.

I Was Their American Dream: A Graphic Memoir (not read)

I found this book while looking for books similar to *American Born Chinese* as I think students would also appreciate a graphic novel included in their suggested reading. The novel follows Mari Andrew, a Filipino Egyptian teen who struggles with trying to fit in. She navigates her way through life. The book is also described as a tribute to immigrants in pursuit of the American Dream (goodreads.com).

This book would be helpful as it could help by adding another immigrant/ assimilation story that talks about another perspective on the American Dream. The book could also showcase how race, ethnicity, and gender become obstacles when trying to achieve the much desired American Dream. The book seems to display Exeter Qualities 3, 6, and 7. The book is a memoir, so real experiences are showcased through a female protagonist. Themes present also tackle immigration which is a real-world topical issue that can concern students and their own lives.

Works Cited

1. "The Great Gatsby: Central Idea Essay." *Sparknotes*, SparkNotes, <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/gatsby/central-idea-essay/what-does-the-green-light-mean/>.
2. Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Heinemann ELT, 1999.
3. crash course. "The Roaring 20's: Crash Course US History #32." *YouTube*, YouTube, 4 Oct. 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VfOR1XCMf7A&t=514s&ab_channel=CrashCourse.
4. Ibarra, Ruby. One, Ann. "7,000 Miles". *CIRCA91*. Beatrock Music LLC, 2017, Track Number 17.
5. Clan, Wu-Tang. "C.R.E.A.M. (Cash Rules Everything Around Me)." *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*, [Expanded Edition]., Sony Music Entertainment, 1993, Track Number 1.
6. Yang, Gene Luen, and Lark Pien. *American Born Chinese*. First Second, 2006.
7. Pitre, Leilya. "'Let The Creativity Bloom.'" *DR. BICKMORE'S YA WEDNESDAY*, 22 Dec. 2021, <http://www.drlickmoresyawednesday.com/weekly-posts/archives/12-2021>.
8. Thomas, Angie. *The Hate U Give*. Walker Books, 2017.

9. “The Hate U Give (the Hate U Give, #1).” *Goodreads*, Goodreads,
https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/32075671-the-hate-u-give?ac=1&from_search=true&qid=eES2kQPfOa&rank=1.
10. de la Peña, Matt. *We Were Here*. 1st Ember ed. New York, Ember, 2011.
11. Gyasi, Yaa. *Homegoing*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2016.
12. Gharib, Malaka, and Toby Leigh. *I Was Their American Dream: A Graphic Memoir*. First edition. New York, Clarkson Potter, 2019.
13. “I Was Their American Dream: A Graphic Memoir.” *Goodreads*, Goodreads,
https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/40909448-i-was-their-american-dream?ac=1&from_search=true&qid=ehwDicpPWB&rank=1.