

Kevin Tran
Dr. Warner
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Unit of Study: Materialism and the American Dream

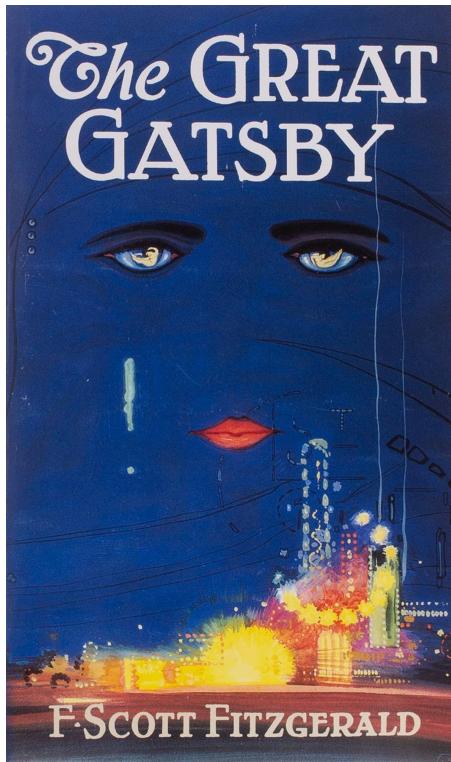
Rationale:

Spending and buying things can be accompanied by feelings of intense joy or shallow emptiness. The overconsumption and necessity of obtaining stuff is a core principle of the American Dream. By overspending and overconsuming it is supposed to capture the feeling of satisfaction in knowing wealth and freedom. Yet, it is the overvaluing of material things that brings not joy but an immense growing attitude of materialism.

The centerpiece work, *The Great Gatsby*, encompasses themes of materialism as the novel is set during the 1920s during a huge economic boom for the United States. While the story simply follows the protagonist, Jay Gatsby reconnecting with an old lover he lost, the obsession and details hint at this superficial reality of materialism. Due to the lack of lived experiences, and a disconnect between our contemporary period and history, students might be unable to recognize the symbolism represented in F. Scott Fitzgerald's work as a connection to the materialism that persisted within that time period. The student's would not be able to understand how it connects to the ever growing divide of what America represents, and how this obsession over money is a corruption of the American dream.

This unit is designed so students can better grasp the centerpiece novel and understand the rich symbolism that encompasses it. Each companion novel and into assignment is designed to help students focus on the diction and motifs prevalent in literature, so that they can get a better idea of how to apply that understanding in their reading of *The Great Gatsby*.

Introducing the Novel:



To introduce this unit I would have them watch the movie first. This is different from how many teachers would prefer to teach the novel, as typically you would have the students read *The Great Gatsby*, and then watch the film after to compare. However, because I want students to be able to highlight the usage of literary devices and themes presented in the novel, I feel students would be better prepared by capturing a visual element. Ideally the students will watch the 1974 film, as based on my observations, that film is better suited as an adaptation to teach students. Students should be prepared to take notes on all the aspects of the film that catches their attention. I feel this visual element would better prepare the students to start thinking about how symbolism works in different mediums.

Then I would assign them the poem "Let America be America Again" by Langston Hughes, that depicts the way Hughes views America and the American dream. This poem will get students thinking about the ways in which the ideals of America either succeed or fail to

represent the lived perspectives of many Americans. Langston Hughes' own perspective as an African-American poet may differ from an Asian-American or Mexican-American. How does that eventually change our understanding on whether the American Dream is real or not? The poem will help contextualize the American Dream as an ideal that is supposed to represent one thing, but may instead be another. This will aid the students as they begin to analyze how the American Dream is supposed to be about freedom and the abundance of opportunities, but instead is becoming more about worshipping money and power as *The Great Gatsby*, presents.

Throughout the Unit:

Due to the varied lived experiences of each student, I would assign them a writing activity where they would write a brief reflection on what America means to them. This is to hopefully be accomplished after assigning the Langston Hughes poem. The activity will get the students to begin to think critically about what America and the American Dream means to them to understand how it lines up with the perceived notion of the American Dream.

The unit is designed with companion novels in mind that are not all related to materialism, but rather around huge themes and concepts. By assigning these companion novels, students should be able to address the ways authors use literary devices to tell both a story, but build upon important ideas and themes. The novels should get students to think about symbolism and the way different ideas, concepts, objects in a novel represent bigger themes. For example, assigning students the novel *After the First Death*, is surrounding them with the perspective of what nationalism means, and how do other countries view the United States as a whole.

Using the companion novels, I would ask each student to keep a list of recurring symbols or objects that they deem important. Later when they have completed the novel they can go back

and write brief sentences about the symbols on their list and what they believe it means. Ideally, a lecture on literary devices and symbolism will be given to check for their understanding on what these concepts mean. This will help access whether I need to clarify or give more context to help aid the students through their reading of *The Great Gatsby*.

Companion Works:

- *After the First Death* by Robert Cormier is a novel that captures the perspectives of a group of terrorists desperate to get home. It focuses on the idea of nationalism, who really is right in a war of two countries, and the rich coming of age story between Kate and Miro. These two vastly different characters should make students feel more engaged with the story to better help them contextualize the themes in the book. These characters may be more interesting or relatable than someone like Jay Gatsby and the rich shallow characters in *The Great Gatsby*, so ultimately students should better grasp how to analyze a novel and look at the symbolism in a text.
- *These Violent Delights* by Chloe Gong is a novel set in 1920s Shanghai that offers a different look at the Shakespearean story of *Romeo and Juliet*. As it deals with ideas of colonialism and filial piety, ultimately students will grapple with the understanding of living up to parental expectations. They can view the setting of the 1920s in a different perspective as this focuses on a China divided by imperialism, so it will focus on the real inequalities that possess a country. This novel is a unique, diverse perspective that hopefully will let students better contextualize the setting of *The Great Gatsby*, while giving them something entertaining to capture symbolism.

- *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins is a dystopian novel that focuses on the country of Panem and how those in poverty that are selected compete in a violent death match for a reward if they win. The social inequality between the wealthy who live in the Capitol versus those who live in the Districts should help students better contextualize what social inequality looks like. This novel is a great companion to *The Great Gatsby*, because students will be able to make the connection between the absurd materialism in that novel and the absurd materialism in *The Hunger Games*, both of which capture the concept of social inequality.
- *Surviving Cinderella* by Stacy Hansen is a novel that depicts the life of Katie Mitchell who is raised by materialistic parents and finds comfort at school through her love of music. There are plots by the “in crowd” in a series of bullying that captures the dark realities of teen bullying and social circles. The novel is an engaging companion piece that will put students right in the perspectives of their own high school experiences. Students can learn about the superficiality of school cliques and connect it to the superficiality of the lives of wealthy people in *The Great Gatsby*.

Closing the Unit:

To close this unit I would play any song and give a lecture to check for the understanding of students on interpreting symbols within literature. A final essay will comprise of analyzing how one of the companion novels in comparison to *The Great Gatsby* captures their individual themes. After this unit students will hopefully be able to understand how to analyze literature on their own and how to read the symbolism that is laced within a text.

Works Cited

Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. Scholastic, 2008.

Cormier, Robert. *After the First Death*. Pantheon Books, 1979.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925.

Gong, Chloe. *These Violent Delights*. Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2020.

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