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The American Dream and Stratification of the Social Classes in Literature

**Rationale:**

What does it mean to be successful? Does gaining massive wealth and status bring upon happiness? We are often told that hard work and dedication is what will lead us to opportunities of success and financial stability. These very ideals, known as the American Dream, serves as a symbol of hope to climb up the social classes and anyone can have the ability to succeed. A fundamental aspect of the American Dream is the hope of achieving prosperity for not only themselves, but for their children as well.

For example, my grandmother immigrated to the United States in hopes of achieving a better life for her children which led to my mother working to support us for our education. This leads to the expectation that the next generation should do better than the previous generation. Although a person from any social background could make a fortune, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* exposes the illusion of the American Dream through the social hierarchy and American aristocracy, families with old wealth, who scorn the newly rich.

*The Great Gatsby* will serve as the centerpiece for this unit of study to address how the influence of the American Dream is depicted through Fitzgerald’s vision accompanied with historical context about the 1920s. My objective is to have students question to whether Fitzgerald’s message has been sustained or lost to present-day audiences? And to what extent does Gatsby’s wealth, and all the luxuries that it provides, affect his ability to achieve what he desires? I plan to make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest. Through the text and activities, I hope to motivate students to construct their own interpretations of the American Dream and identify the social issues through Fitzgerald’s writing.

**Introduction into Unit:**

We will watch CrashCourse’s video, “The Roaring 20's: Crash Course US History #32,” together in class to learn more about the historical context behind *The Great Gatsby*. This video provides visual representation and allows the students to gain a greater understanding of how life was in the 1920s. The students will write down any information from the video that helps them understand the time period and will be accompanied with short answer questions that will be used in a class discussion. Some examples below:

* How do the lives of people then compare to today’s lifestyles?
* What were some of the benefits/difficulties of living in the 1920s?
* What was the attitude of the wealthy toward the poor?
* What values seemed to be the most important of those living in the Jazz Age? Explain.

After watching the video together, I will create groups of 4-6 students to go over a guide of what they anticipate in *The Great Gatsby* and share their answers in a class discussion after reaching a consensus. The purpose of an “anticipation guide” is to generate curiosity and interest before reading the text.

**Through the Unit:**

I would like to start each class session with a recap of the chapter/section that was assigned for home reading so we can work on daily journal entries at the beginning of class. As “starters,” there will be a prompt (Define being “wealthy.” What does that mean to you? What is considered “wealthy?” (3-5 Sentences)) to engage students in a reflective activity which can be shared in a brief discussion. The purpose of these journal activities allows me to give the students a refresher in the text as well as allowing them to construct their own thoughts on the text as we read along. I would also like to have the students read the text together in class on a specific section (can be independent or groups) so we can hold a class discussion regarding the section.

There will also be quizzes every 1-2 weeks to fully understand terms or concepts that we examine in the unit, but students will be given 5-6 minutes in beginning of class to study together prior to quiz. In addition, there will also be a group project for students to create a poster of a significant scene from the text and present it to class. A paper (2-3 pg) explaining why this scene was chosen and an analysis will be turned in along with the poster. This is an opportunity for students to become more experienced in teamwork to work on a visual project and posters will be hung in a gallery-like fashion.

After finishing the text, there will be a project assigned to allow students to choose a creative form to submit near the end of the unit. Options may include essay/poetry, fan fiction, visual media (art/video), song, or free choice (must be approved before beginning) with specific criteria for each one along with a rubric.

* Reflects understanding of story
* Quality of project
* Project relates to story
* Detailed paragraph of project

This project gives the students free reign over their topics while accommodating a variety of learning styles.

**Beyond the Text:**

In regard to YA literature, I would pair up texts with similar themes addressing social class, gender, race, and identity, but they can range depending on the genre. Some of the texts take place in a dystopian society while others are more in tune with reality:

* The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini **(TRIGGER WARNING)**
  + The story of Amir, a Sunni Muslim, who struggles to find his place in the world because of the aftereffects and fallout from a series of traumatic childhood events. This text must have a trigger warning as it contains violence and sexual assault.
* The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas
  + The text follows Starr Carter, a 16-year-old black girl from a poor neighborhood who attends an elite private school in a predominantly white, affluent part of the city. She grapples with racism, police brutality, and activism after witnessing her black friend murdered by the police.
* Divergent by Veronica Roth
  + In a dystopian society, Tris Prior must select the faction to devote the rest of her lives to but learns she is a Divergent and will never be able to fit into just one faction. Throughout the novel, she explores her identity within a society that defines its citizens by their social and personality-related affiliation with five factions.
* The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins
  + The novel follows Katniss Everdeen, who resides in District 12, after she volunteers to replace her sister in the death match known as the Hunger Games. As a resident in the poorest district, Katniss is expected to fail as the tributes from her district often perish early in the game.

**Concluding the Unit:**

The unit will conclude with a final essay where students will track one of Fitzgerald’s motifs throughout the novel and write a final essay on the significance of the motif and relation to the values of the American Dream. Students will write and present research on historical information pertaining to Gatsby and the Jazz Age. By the end of the unit, students will be able to:

* construct interpretations of motifs and symbols
* identify, discuss, and support from the text the major themes:
* identify the social issues and discuss the techniques that Fitzgerald uses to address and expose them

Works Cited

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