Samuel Hoffman

Engl 112B

Professor Warner

Unit of Study

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Identity and *the Great Gatsby*

Everyone must eventually answer the dreaded question: “Who am I?” You can try to run from it, try to hide from it, but one day you will have to answer it. For some people it takes a long time to answer that question, for others they know immediately. You often begin to work through this question around the time of middle school, and some people don’t find the answers they were looking for until well into adulthood. The question weighs heavily on young adult minds throughout high school. All around, people are changing, friend groups are endlessly being created and destroyed like some nuclear reaction on a macro scale. Many Young Adult novels deal with the idea of discovering your identity, changing your identity, or even hiding your true identity, and that is because high school is such a volatile environment for a person’s personality.

In this Unit of Study, I will be examining the *Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald and how it portrays the identities of the characters, and how that relates to young adults in their high school years. *The Great Gatsby* revolves around the titular character of Gatsby, a mysterious man with a number of alter egos and personas, as well as numerous other characters who have not yet decided who they are, or if who they are will remain compatible with the world around them. Gatsby’s mysterious past, and the way his past is written by Fitzgerald makes you question just how much of it is real. Gatsby admits to creating this rich man persona to get Daisy, but after Gatsby dies, Wolfsheim remarks that he “made that boy.” This puts us into doubt over who Gatsby really is, and if the entire “real” backstory we’ve been fed up to this point is just another layer of lies. On top of this, Gatsby, with his numerous fake personas, his undefined hidden identity, we see that he is truly not a happy person. The novel tells us that it is possible to be someone else than who you truly are, but it comes at a cost. And is that cost worth it?

Other characters also shift their personalities throughout the novel. Nick says at one point that “personality” is just a “series of unbroken gestures.” Your actions are a performance, and the way you perform these actions forms your personality, both for you, and the people around you. You can change your personality by manipulating your performance. There are conflicting messages within this novel as it relates to identity, we are told that you can change who you are to who you want to be, but at the same time we are told that there is a cost to changing or hiding your true self.

*The Great Gatsby* deals with Chapter’s 4, 5, and particularly 6 of *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning*. Chapter 6 stands out because this novel deals heavily with identity.

With the Text:

I would like to begin the first class with a party-like atmosphere in the same vein as the parties of the roaring 20’s. I would play some big band jazz, and have a fruit punch bowl, if the administration would let me. The party will be the background of a lecture on the historical context of *The Great Gatsby*, the post-Great War new society, with newly enfranchised women, and the great experiment of prohibition going into effect. Women were pushing more and more for equality, crime was on the rise, and with the US profiting greatly from the war in Europe, it was a wild decade. After the lecture, I would assign the students the novel, asking them to complete a chapter per day. The book has nine chapters over all, and each chapter should take no longer than a half hour to complete. Student will also create a chart to track the changes to each characters personality chapter by chapter.

After nine days of reading and working through characters, after the novel is finished and each student has their chart filled in, I would aggregate the charts into one big chart on the whiteboard. That way other students can fill in the things they have missed, and we can track the consequences for the changes in personality, both the positive and negative effects.

Other books:

Many other novels deal with identity, so I will separate the class into four groups and assign them one book each. Each of the books asks and tries to answer a question about identity, so I will have students keep that question in mind. The books will be:

* *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Steven Chbosky. This book asks, “How do you accept who you are?”
* *Divergent* by Veronica Roth. This book asks, “Is identity a choice?”
* *The Hunger Games* by Suzanna Collins. This book asks, “Am I allowed to be who I am?”
* *Alanna: The First Adventure* by Tamora Pierce. This book asks, “What are the consequences of hiding who I am?”

It should take the students around two weeks to finish these books. Each group will be asked to create a presentation based on their book where they will give the class a synopsis, summarize the characters and their identities, and answer the question each book asks. The students should work together in their groups every day for two weeks to create this presentation. This will be the class work for the students. As for homework, the students will be asked to write a compare and contrast essay for a character in the book they were assigned as well as a character within *The Great Gatsby.*

After the essay is turned in, and after the students have given their group presentations, I will put on the 2013 Baz Luhrmann *Gatsby* film for the class to enjoy as a fun way to end the lesson.

Works Cited:

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