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ENGL 112B
2 December, 2024

The American Dream and its Corruption on Social Mobility and Identity

I. Rational

The American Dream is a concept rooted in promises of freedom, opportunity, a better life, and most of all, success. However, are these expectations truly delivered when aspects such as class, identity, and social expectations come into play as challenges or barriers? For many, the American Dream acts as a guidance on how to live and what ambitions to have, reinforcing their resilience. For others, the American Dream has turned into an unreachable goal, revealing the harsh and devastating realities of inequality and societal divisions. This unit will allow students to explore, analyze, and challenge this promise of equality and opportunity while highlighting the tension between reality and aspirations. By utilizing resources such as YA literature, films, poems, and videos, this unit will focus on inspecting how class, identity, and social mobility merge with the idea of the American Dream, which will in turn encourage students to reflect on their own experiences and opinions.

Adolescence is a crucial time for students to form their identities and develop an understanding of their place in the world and society, making this unit fundamentally relevant to them. The selected text and media in this unit offer young adults an opportunity to explore the complexities that come with pursuing success and how those goals can intersect with one's personal identity. Furthermore, the text and media reflect character struggles while navigating a complicated world that often feels at odds with them. Allowing students a close examination not only of the systematic barriers within these worlds, but also of how these aspects—such as class, privilege, and identity—affect a person's decision-making, views, and outcomes.

This unit will encourage students to look beyond surface-level depictions of success and explore the deeper complexities that lie beneath it. By using *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald as the centerpiece of this unit and pairing it with YA novels such as *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, as well as works by artists Lorde, Mandi Sagal, Ray Charles, and poet Langston Hughes, students will interact with themes of hope, identity, social mobility, resilience, disillusion, and power dynamics. Each of these works offer a variety of perspectives and motives on how characters and individuals navigate social expectations and how these same expectations help shape their identity and opportunities. Therefore, students will be able to analyze and evaluate the ideal of the American Dream as more than just a concept but as a shared experience that is influenced by individuals' personal aspects such as race, class, and privilege. In addition to fostering critical thinking and literary analysis skills, this unit seeks to help students connect the themes explored in these literary works with real-world experiences and build a sense of empathy for those who might experience a different side of the American Dream.

II. Into the Text

To begin this unit, students will be asked to set up a journal where they will write an entry for every class period. Students will be able to take this journal home and decorate it according to their personality and style.

After the journals are personalized and decorated, I will provide students with prompts for their journal entries—students will be able to choose which one of them they want to answer and get at least 15 minutes of class time to write:

- **What is “The American Dream” and what is your family’s version of the “American Dream”?**

- **Listen or read the lyrics of “American Dream” by Mandi Sagal and “America the Beautiful” by Ray Charles. Discuss which song you believe to be more accurate to the American Dream in your opinion (both songs show incredibly different version of the American Dream)**
- **Are there any lyrics, quotes, or book characters that speak to you and your version of the American Dream? Discuss why.**

Both the question and the songs will get students thinking about what the phrase “The American Dream” means, not only to others but themselves as well. The comparison of the two songs will show how the idea of the American Dream can be distorted and negatively impacted.

After students are done writing, I will open up a discussion to allow them to share their thoughts and perspectives on these prompts and their interpretations of the American Dream. This discussion will allow students to compare their reflections, explore contrasting views, and identify consistent themes. Furthermore, by having students engage in this conversation, they will develop a deeper understanding of how individual experiences, aspirations and social standing can shape the way individuals view and approach life.

Additionally, to further develop the idea of social mobility and identity, I will provide students with the lyrics of “Royals” by Lorde from her album *Pure Heroine*. Students will annotate and analyze the lyrics as homework and during class time they will be asked to share their thoughts and annotation in groups of three or four to further develop the understanding of these themes.

**But every song's like
Gold teeth, Grey Goose, trippin' in the bathroom
Bloodstains, ball gowns, trashin' the hotel room
We don't care**

**We're driving Cadillacs in our dreams
But everybody's like
Cristal, Maybach, diamonds on your timepiece
Jet planes, islands, tigers on a gold leash
We don't care
We aren't caught up in your love affair
...
And we'll never be royals (royals)
It don't run in our blood
That kind of luxe just ain't for us
We crave a different kind of buzz**

After these activities, I will have students take a look at the poem “I, Too” by Langston Hughes which offers a contrasting yet complementary perspective on themes of identity, social mobility, and equality that surround the American Dream. Before presenting the poem, I will provide students with a quick lesson on the historical context that surrounds this poem and Hughes, to help students understand the cultural and social impact that this poem had.

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

But I laugh,

And eat well,

And grow strong.

Tomorrow,

**I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.**

**Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—**

I, too, am America.

After students analyze the poem, they will be given time to create their own version of a poem focusing on their experiences, desires, and views, using the themes that we have explored in class so far. These poems will serve as a creative outlet for them to express their personal reflections on aspects that surround the American Dream. At the end of this activity, students will participate in a readers theater where they will get the opportunity to share their work outloud. This format will allow the students to visualize and connect with diverse perspectives.

III. Through the Text

I will dedicate a part of class time to read *The Great Gatsby*, to ensure that students are not only reading but actively engaging with the text. To support this, I will provide students with an annotation key. Students will annotate the book using see-through post it notes as they read and are encouraged to expand their thoughts and reflections by documenting them in their

journals. At the end of the unit, students will turn in the annotated book alongside any notes they have made.

Yellow- Key passages that relate to the American Dream; class, identity, and social mobility.

Pink- Actions, dialogue, or descriptions that reveal important aspects about the character's identity, struggle, and growth.

Purple- Power dynamics; moments where power, privilege, and inequality are seen.

Blue- Symbols that represent larger ideas.

Green- Connection to other works seen in class.

Red- Powerful phrases and moments.

In addition to the in-class reading of *The Great Gatsby*, students will also be expected to read *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins independently at home. To ensure reading progress, students will be required to read four chapters per week, following the same annotation style as *The Great Gatsby*—any notes and annotations of *The Hunger Games* will also be turned in alongside *The Great Gatsby*'s towards the end of the unit.

On top of that at the end of each week, students will be provided with a few minutes to discuss any relevant aspects or part of the books they would like to share, seek clarification or different perspectives.

Activities to do While Reading These Books

1. Students will have a character chart that includes Name, Description, what was their American Dream, and if they accomplish it towards the end. Students will work to fill out this chart for at least 5 characters and will need to keep track as we go through the story.

Name	Description	What was their American Dream?	Did they get their American Dream?
<i>Ex. Jay Gatsby</i>	<i>Ex. Tan Skin, Short</i>	<i>Ex. To win back Daisy</i>	<i>Ex. No, Gatsby was</i>

	<i>hair, Brilliant smile</i>	<i>and be worthy of her</i>	<i>murdered by George Wilson who thinks Gatsby killed his wife</i>
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- Students will create a vision/dream board that represents the American Dream of a character of their choosing. They will present these in class as well as a rationale for why they picked this character to make a vision board for, answering the question; Why did their dream appeal to you?
- Brown Bag activity: Students will choose three items they would like to put in a brown bag to represent chapters/characters alongside an explanation as to why they chose these specific items. These items can be quotes objects or symbolic items like “hope”

IV. Ending the Unit

To bring this unit to a closure, students will write an essay using the knowledge and insights they gained throughout the unit. The purpose of this essay is to assess students’ understanding of the novel’s theme of corruption of identity and social mobility. The word count for this essay is 750 to 1,000 words. Students will be asked to answer the following prompt:

“To what extent is the American Dream accessible to everyone, or is it an ideal reserved for a specific group of people? Provide specific examples from both *The Great Gatsby* and *The Hunger Games* to support your stance.”

V. Beyond the Text

The desire to achieve a better life is a universal theme that appears in both classic literature and contemporary YA works. In the novel *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, it shows how the pursuit of success and the American Dream can come along with a sense of emptiness and obsession, as seen with Gatsby’s journey. Similarly, in YA literature such as *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, characters such as Katniss, Peeta, and many others struggle

and strive for success and a better life where they are free of danger but face challenges that complicate achieving their dream. Both these stories highlight how the American Dream can be a common goal among individuals but the path of obtaining it is filled with complications, obstacles, and struggles.

- *Six of Crows* by Leigh Bardugo
 - This novel centers around a group of six outcasts that are driven by the desire of power, wealth, and status—motivations that are much too similar to *Gatsby's*. In order to gain the power they desire, all six of the characters participate in a heist to earn a large fortune. However, as they try to achieve this, each character struggles with personal secrets, desires, and identity problems.
- *After the First Death* by Robert Cormier
 - Novel centers on the hijacking of a bus filled with children. This novel focuses on themes of power, loyalty, and the sacrifices made in the name of the greater good. Milo's internal motives can be compared to *Gatsby's* since both characters are in pursuit for a better life; for themselves and their country.
- *The Cruel Prince* by Holly Black
 - In this novel, a human girl named Jude navigates a dangerous faerie realm, where she struggles to achieve respect, power, and political influence. Given her humanity she is considered to be of lower status according to the Fae. However, this doesn't stop Jude from pressuring power and prestige—aligning with *Gatsby's* desires and motives.
- *Witness* by Karen Hesse

- This novel tells the story of a small town during the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, through different perspectives. The novel highlights the struggles and challenges that characters face when regarding themes of equality, social mobility, and racial divisions.
- *We Were Here* by Matt de la Peña
 - This novel follows a troubled teenager named Miguel, who ends up in a group home after a tragic event. Miguel ends up on the border to Mexico where he realizes he wants to stay in America and atone for his crimes because he's not ready to give up his life in America or his family.

Work Cited

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