

Teaching The Great Gatsby Handout

(Cuenin - Spring 2014)

Teaching literature and writing can be challenging but also exciting. The Great Gatsby is a classic book and is still taught in many high schools. This handout is geared toward AP level and/or college level courses. These ideas and examples are to 1.) Have students move beyond basic plot comprehension to critical thinking 2.) understand the variety of ways in which Fitzgerald represents the themes 3.) Move students from thinking critically to writing clear analysis with the text.

Discussion Ideas

Facilitating discussions about themes, symbols, and characters is not only important for students to understand the plot of a story, but it's also imperative as they learn to create meaning in their own context. Note: My students wanted to fall back on the quick, easy interpretation - this is just about wealthy people in the Jazz Age. There are many merits to that thought, but our goal was to move beyond that simple interpretation to more critical thoughts.

Wealth [Who has wealth? How was the wealth attained? How is that wealth shown and perceived by others? Does this theme reflect on Fitzgerald's Jazz Age?]

Homes [Architecture, description, and location of character homes are important to symbolism in the book and also parallel character development.]

The American Dream [Many interpretations of this novel keep in discussion how it may or may not be a criticism of the American Dream. Students can help define how they think of the American Dream and discuss whether it's changed or not.]

Social Life [Parties, clothes, cars, music and other descriptions are found throughout the novel. What does this moments do for the novel? Do they represent characters or larger themes?]

Characters: Nick Carraway - Narrator [Students enjoy discussing the characters and their relationships, as it should be analyzed. It's important for them to remember that this entire book is seen through the eyes of Nick, so discussion of the role of the narrator will be important.]

Important Quotes:

When teaching literature, it's important to zoom in on the written language in short sentences or phrases, so that the students can analyze the meaning of the words as well as the relationship to the entire novel. Here are a few examples. A useful class activity is to have students find their own points in the novel where they were challenged or interested and then discuss those moments in class together.

"They were careless people, Tom and Daisy - they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made..." (179)

"Let us learn to show our friendship for a man when he is alive and not after he is dead" (172).

Essay Ideas:

Each of these examples are general ideas to get students thinking about the text and how they can use it to create a meaningful written analysis. In each of these, students will be looking at his or her overall large interpretation (or theme) and how they can use specific moments from the text to reflect that idea. Discussing essay topics in class is valuable for a variety of reasons, but it be beneficial to the overall essay writing process when students have clarity.

EX. 1: Discussion of "Jazz Age" through music descriptions in *The Great Gatsby*.

(How did Fitzgerald define "Jazz Age"? What is distinctive about jazz? Using quotes describing music from the text, do they reflect Fitzgerald's feelings about this generation, about the characters?)

EX. 2: "The American Dream" and *Gatsby*.

(Defining the American Dream according to tradition, according to you, and/or according to Fitzgerald. What does *Gatsby* represent or not represent about the "American Dream"? Use quotes and descriptions about his past and journey to wealth to discuss.)