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Exploring the Attainability of the American Dream

Rationale

Overtime the American Dream has established a shared set of ideals that guide the spirit of the United States and those who migrate to settle here. These shared ideals include a notion of freedom and the possibility of upward social mobility-as long as Americans are willing to work for it. As time has transgressed, many believe the American Dream is a pure mirage, filled with capitalist views, class differences, and unrealistic societal expectations to survive in a country tailored to the white race.

The Great Gatsby hints at, and breaks down the American Dream's promise of wealth and prosperity, yet also critiques the notion of its attainability. Gatsby is an example of someone who has suffered the most from the promise of social mobility inherent to the American Dream. He spends his entire life believing that if he makes enough money and acquires enough possessions, he will feel "enough" or "accepted" by others; consequently, he is never accepted by the upper class despite his success in acquiring his wealth.

While the unit will center around *The Great Gatsby*, and whether the American Dream exists, the unit will also push students to understand and learn what the American Dream means to those who migrate here among the stereotypes and feelings they face. Hopefully as students read the novel alongside the poems, listen to songs, and read an additional novel of

their choice, will be able to create a definition of their own of what the American Dream is, whether it even exists, and if its attainable at all.

Introducing the Unit

We will listen to “Made in America” by Jay-Z and Kanye West Ft. Frank Ocean first not seeing any lyrics only listening to the song. Students will then write down things that they noted

- The beat
- The artists that sang it
- Small phrases etc.

We will then listen to it a second time but this time with the lyrics in front of them, asking them to underline and annotate as they go.

Students will begin by sharing with a partner on things that stood out to them from the song for 3 mins and then we will come together as class to break down the most important points in the song and what they mean (see below).

“Reading Between the Lines Handout”

Lyric/References	Interpreted Meaning

References to:

- Coretta Scott King,
- Malcom X,
- being “on the come up” and
- “I got my liberty chopping grams’ up
Street justice, I pray God Understand us
I pledge allegiance to all the scramblers
This is the Star Spangled Banner”

Students will then journal down and respond to the following questions:

- What is the American Dream? What does it mean to you?
- What does it mean to “make it in life”?
- Does money buy happiness?

By talking about what stood out to them from the song, and answering the 3 questions above. Students will get a first glimpse of the many perspectives among their class of what the American Dream is and what it means to their classmates as we will all go around the room and share. Shortly after we will jump into introducing who Gatsby is and the other characters. Students will flip through the book and yell out characters they see and as they yell them out I will create a “character tree” on the board. Visually, students will be able to see all of the many characters that will influence and impact Gatsby’s life. The song offers a contemporary take on leveling up in society, what the American Dream means for the artists signing it, what it means for those who are black, and predict how it relates to who Gatsby is.

Link to the [Song](#)

Link to the [Lyrics](#)

Through the Text:

A timeline of about 20 pages per day will be given to read. This will allow for us to finish the book in about 2 weeks allowing for one or 2 “days off” from the book and added handouts/HW. Reading should take about 25 minutes and will be accompanied by annotations and a journal to respond back to the text and any given in class writing. This will be a grade. Responses will be confidential and students do have the option to not share their responses/journal entries if needed.

Journal entries will be free write but can include:

- What is the main idea of the text? What Happened?
- How do you think Daisy feels?

- What do you think of the affair?
- Who is to blame? Etc.

I will also introduce a poem as we read the text [“To Live in the Borderlands”](#) by Gloria Anzaldua, where the Latino perspective of the American Dream is hinted at. I will provide a handout with translated words, phrases, and their connotation for non-Spanish speaking students to be able to follow along.

Another “Reading Between the Lines Handout” will be done in journals.

Lines/Text	Interpreted Meaning

This will be done once again later on in the unit with the poem [“Let America Be America Again”](#) by Langston Hughes, however we will focus on the feelings and emotional aspect of it. The anger, the “scars”, feeling “foolish”, not feeling “free”, and the American Dream being an illusion that has been “stained”.

Lines/Text	Interpreted Meaning

Analyzing this poem will allow students to see Hughes’ perspective and feelings on the American Dream, but will also allow students to understand Gatsby’s desire to feel accepted and wanted so badly. Despite his wealth he doesn’t seem to reach success in the eyes of others and fails at love, and true happiness.

To conclude the unit students will be asked to read another novel from the options given

- *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas
- *A Very Large Expanse of Sea* by Tahereh Mafi

Once they are done reading, students will write an essay comparing the emotions, stereotypes and feelings shown in the novels, how it relates to the American Dream, and how it compares to *The Great Gatsby*. Themes will include failure, real life experiences, misconstrued ideas of success, social class, societal expectations, and how the American Dream attainability differs within race and socioeconomics.

Beyond the Text:

This unit is focused mainly on the American Dream's attainability and if it truly exists. Yet it differs from person to person. Citizenship, race, economics, class, stereotypes, and upbringing are all factors to take into account. To go beyond the text, students can read more contemporary novels hinting at experiences alike such as:

- *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas
 - The novel follows Starr a young black girl who switches between two lifestyles- the poor primarily black neighborhood and the wealthy predominantly white neighborhood where she goes to school. Stereotypes, class differences and race are all big themes.
- *A Very Large Expanse of Sea* by Tahereh Mafi
 - "It's 2002, a year after 9/11. It's an extremely turbulent time politically, but especially so for someone like Shirin, a sixteen-year-old Muslim girl who's tired of being stereotyped."

- *We Were Here* by Matt de La Pena
 - “From the streets of Stockton to the beaches of Venice, all the way down to the Mexican border, *We Were Here* follows a journey of self-discovery by a boy who is trying to forgive himself in an unforgiving world.”
- *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston
 - A Chinese American woman tells of the Chinese myths, family stories and events of her California childhood that shaped her identity. It describes her experience growing up female and Chinese American in a California.
- Or also learn about and understand how the American Dream originated and how it's possible
 - <https://www.thebalance.com/what-is-the-american-dream-quotes-and-history-3306009>

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