

***The Great Gatsby* and the Roaring Twenties**

The Basics

Time Required

3-4 class periods

Subject Areas

10th Grade American Literature

Emergence of Modern America, 1890-1930

Common Core Standard Addressed:

Writing Standards for English Language Arts 6-12

Author

Katy Hudak (2011)

The Lesson

Introduction

These three lessons are part of our study of *The Great Gatsby*, the Roaring Twenties, and the inter-war period in America. I plan to use music to encourage students' understanding of *Gatsby* as a remarkably rich resource for understanding American popular culture in the early 1920's. Fitzgerald's novel is a meticulously crafted snapshot of post-World War I America. No choices he makes in this short novel are haphazard, and that certainly includes the song titles that appear throughout the text. Rather than being throwaway details that readers might overlook in favor of more central plot or character elements, the songs that are the focus of this lesson will prove to be rich cultural reference points that not only flesh out the novel's time and place, but can often provide an important commentary on its plot or characters.

Learning Objectives

Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

Uses a variety of print and electronic, primary and secondary sources to gather information.

Uses skills and strategies to understand a variety of literary texts.

Synthesizes information from a variety of texts to draw conclusions.

Understands writing techniques used to influence the reader and accomplish the writer's purpose.

Preparation Instructions

Songs Used in this lesson:

"Suddenly I See"

“Tiny Dancer”
“Sheik of Araby”
“The Love Nest”
“Three O’Clock in the Morning”
“The Rosary”

Lesson Activities

Lesson ONE.

The idea of a movie soundtrack is nothing new to students. Foregrounding the central lesson with a review of some familiar songs that have added vital and rich layers to specific cinematic moments will help students begin to develop the skills they need to notice and evaluate the presence of music in the literature.

Procedure.

1. “Do Now”: Students should write a brief journal. *What does music add to movies? What movie scenes are memorable to you because of the music? Do you have a favorite soundtrack? Briefly write about them.* They will then share their movie memories with the class.
2. Show the first movie clip: *The Devil Wears Prada* opening scene, with the sound muted. Play it again with sound (“Suddenly I See” by KT Tunstall--movie clip not available online except for purchase: <http://www.amazon.com/Devil-Wears-Prada-Widescreen/dp/B000J103PC>). Ask students to write briefly about what the music added to the clip. Use VAT-style focus questions. Pair and share comments.
3. Play Elton John’s song “Tiny Dancer.” Ask students about any thoughts or memories they have of the song. Play it again as the movie clip: the bus scene from the movie *Almost Famous* (available on Youtube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Qn3tel9FWU>). Again, ask students to write briefly about what the music added to the clip, using VAT-style focus questions. Pair and share comments.
4. Add to journal: *Did this exercise change or revise your earlier thoughts?* Submit journal for quick assessment.

Lesson TWO.

This lesson will extend the soundtrack idea to another medium: literature. The three songs that come up first in *Gatsby* are “The Sheik of Araby,” “Love Nest,” and “Ain’t We Got Fun.” The lesson comes after the teacher has led the class through the first three chapters of the novel. Before beginning the assignment, explain that the goal is to apply the concept of a soundtrack to this novel in order to discover whether music can add to literature much as we saw it do for film.

Procedure.

1. Play all three songs at the beginning of class. Students listen and read along with lyrics, jotting notes on the VAT-style general questions, which can be projected on the SmartBoard. Discuss.
2. Assign chapters 4 and 5 of *Gatsby* for independent reading, which include the songs “Sheik of Araby,” “Love Nest,” and “Ain’t We Got Fun.”
3. Put backgrounds, recordings, and lyrics of all three songs on Moodle. Tell students to listen again to all three independently at home. Ask students to annotate the chapters, paying close attention to and including the songs.

4. A day/few days later, put students in random groups, each group discussing a song. Give the groups the VAT-style novel-specific questions. Each group can play and present its song to the class, who should take notes on the new information.

Lesson THREE.

This final lesson should drive home to students the idea of the importance of a literary “soundtrack.” The brief documentary clip will illustrate to students that the songs mentioned by Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* are almost certainly deliberate choices. When faced with similar encounters with music in the future, students might be more apt to attend to them, realizing the potential payoff in exploring/researching them.

Procedure.

1. Tell students there are two additional pop songs they will encounter in their reading (“Three O’Clock in the Morning” in chapter six and “The Rosary” in chapter nine. This lesson does not address an additional song mentioned in chapter nine, Mendelssohn’s “Wedding March”).
2. Show students the clip from *The Great American Dreamer*, the A&E biography of Fitzgerald (available on Youtube http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_g-0u1wfNc) that emphasizes the painstaking revision process he went through as he wrote the middle section of *Gatsby*.
3. Provide lyrics, sheet music images, and recordings on Moodle.
4. Assign students the final chapters of *Great Gatsby*, instructing them to continue to annotate their texts, giving close attention to the two songs. They should also listen to the recordings and read and annotate the lyrics.

Assessment

Using their notes from in-class discussion and their own annotated novels, students will write a short paper on Fitzgerald’s choices for the “soundtrack” to his novel. What do they add to our understanding of the novel and/or its cultural milieu? Students can focus on any specific elements they choose, but must provide close textual support from both the song and the novel to support their assertions.

Resources

“Suddenly I See”
Words and music by KT Tunstall, 2004

Song Background:

KT Tunstall’s hit, released as a single in 2005, is featured on her debut album *Eye to the Telescope*. Tunstall has said that the song is a tribute to female power and that it was inspired by punk icon Patti Smith. The song had a slow rise on the charts, as it only became popular in the summer of 2006 when it was featured prominently in the opening credits of the fashion film “The Devil Wears Prada.” Although it is included in a number of other soundtracks (it was also used in the reality TV show “So You Think You Can Dance,” as well as in “Gray’s Anatomy,” and the debut of “Ugly Betty”), the song seemed a perfect fit for the model worship and fashion obsession depicted in the movie’s opening sequence. This turned out to be a misrepresentation of the song’s intent, however as

Tunstall was reportedly dismayed that her song was used for such a purpose: "I didn't realize the lyrics could perfectly fit a chick flick, and it could sound like I was singing about wanting to be a f***ing model!"

The song's chugging beat, pounding rhythm guitar, and focus on Tunstall's clear, articulate vocals echoes drive its popularity. The upbeat pacing and Tunstall's exuberant voice truly make the song feel celebratory.

Ask students:

1. What is the speaker's attitude towards her subject? Give some examples from the text.
2. Does the subject of the song seem to have conventional beauty? Why or why not? How does this affect your attitude toward the song?
3. Describe the power of the subject over the speaker. Does it remind you of anything else?
4. Have you ever heard this song before? Where and when?

Questions for use with film clip:

5. Describe in a few words what you seen on the screen as the song plays. How does the tempo of this song reflect the film's action?
6. Read the lyrics sheet as you listen and jot down notes, making connections between the audio and the visual. How do the lyrics reflect the film's action?
7. Think of three words or phrases that describe what this song contributes to the opening segment of this film. How well (or poorly) does this song mirror what's going on?
8. This song was first recorded in 2004 and the film was released in the summer of 2006. Are there any visual or auditory clues that fix the song or the scene in that time period? What are they?
9. Show students the Robert Mapplethorpe photo of Patti Smith that is the cover art of her 1975 album "Horses," the photo that Tunstall has said inspired her song. Compare and contrast this visual imagery to the Devil Wears Prada opening sequence.

Lyrics

"Suddenly I See" KT Tunstall available at

<http://www.metrolyrics.com/suddenly-i-see-lyrics-kt-tunstall.html>

"Tiny Dancer"

Words by Bernie Taupin, music by Elton John, 1971

Song Background:

The song's words were written by Elton John's longtime collaborator, Bernie Taupin, to capture the spirit of a trip the two took to California in 1970, especially the women Taupin met. It later became known that the song is about Taupin's first wife. The song was dedicated to her on the album *Madman Across the Water*, John's fourth studio album, released in 1971. The song features a piano-based melody, repetitive and intimate-sounding lyrics during the chorus, and an arrangement including steel guitar, percussion, strings, and backing vocals. Clocking in at 6:12, it was one of the longer radio singles of the period, which may explain Elton John's commentary about it after its inclusion in the 2000 film *Almost Famous*. John has said that the song typically went over "like a lead zeppelin" during live performances but that by including it on the *Almost Famous* soundtrack, "Cameron [Crowe, the movie's writer/director] resurrected that song." The movie is drenched in 1970's hits but most remember it for the scene in which the Allman Brothers-esque band featured in the film, *Stillwater*, is on a bus, each member furious with the others after a falling out. "Tiny

"Dancer" comes on the radio and, one by one, the band members and their girlfriends and groupies begin singing along. Viola: they all remember why they are in it: for the music.

Ask students:

1. Do you think the song is about an actual dancer? Why or why not? What might the term "dancer" suggest if it is not literal?
2. Describe the relationship between the speaker and his subject.
3. What words or phrases place this song in a particular setting? Discuss both time and place as possible settings.
4. Have you heard this song before? Where or when?

Questions for use with film clip:

5. Explain to students the context of the movie scene, the fight the band has had, and how angry they are. How does the song function for the characters in this scene? What is the point of this musical interlude? In other words, why are all the bandmates and their friends smiling and singing by the end of the scene?
6. How does the song's structure make it so effective for this scene? How does it mirror what happens on the bus?
7. What visual cues indicate the time period of the movie? (The film's setting is 1973). Are there any cues in the song that place it in a particular time period?
8. How do the lyrics reflect the film's larger content?

Lyrics

"Tiny Dancer" Elton John and Bernie Taupin available at

http://www.berniejtaupin.com/discography.bt?ds_id=356

Recommended Recording:

Elton John's 1971 album "Madman Across the Water:"

<http://www.jango.com/music/Elton+John?l=0>

"Sheik of Araby"

Words by Harry B. Smith and Francis Wheeler; music by Ted Snyder, 1921

Song Background:

The song was written by the prolific Harry B. Smith, to capitalize, in true Tin Pan Alley style, on the popularity of a 1921 movie, *The Sheik*, starring Rudolph Valentino. The rhythmic, catchy tune was an instant and ubiquitous hit, which Fitzgerald emphasizes by including it as a child's playground chant in his novel. The song was subsequently retooled in 1926, given new lyrics, re-released as simply "The Sheik" and enjoyed a second round as a popular song. At some point, live audiences (and sometimes band members themselves) began to chant "With(out) no pants on" between the lines of the song, making it effectively banned in many dance clubs of the period. The song's minor key and mysterious-sounding tone made it a favorite with jazz bands, and it is now considered a jazz standard. This jazzier version has stood the test of time, as the song has been famously covered numerous times by a wide-ranging assortment of artists such as Fats Domino, The Beatles, Duke Ellington, Jimmy Buffett, and Leon Redbone.

Ask students:

1. Describe the tune you hear. What instruments are featured? What is the rhythmic structure? How do these choices affect your understanding or enjoyment of the song?
2. Point out that in the 1920s, new and less restrictive social mores began to affect popular culture. Where do we see evidence of this in the song?
3. Sometime after this recording, the song was re-invented as a jazz standard. What musical features do you hear that would lend themselves well to such an adaptation?

Questions for novel study:

4. At what point in the novel's narrative does this song appear?
5. Why is this an appropriate song at this point? Why would Fitzgerald have chosen not only to include it, but to insert into his narrative the words that the children are singing?
6. Is there anything we know about Gatsby so far that mirrors the Sheik in the song?
7. Can you imagine Gatsby hearing this song on the radio and making a connection to it? Why or why not? Would Nick make a different connection? Why? What about Daisy?

Lyrics

"Sheik of Araby" by Harry B. Smith, Francis Wheeler, and Ted Snyder available at

<http://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/s/sheikofaraby.shtml>

Recommended Recording:

Club Royal Orchestra 1921 recording, Victor Records:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFYAi6qsJvM>

"The Love Nest"

Words by Otto Harbach, music by Louis A. Hirsch, 1920

Song Background:

Another Tin Pan Alley favorite, this song was written by the classically trained Louis Hirsch in one of his most successful collaborations with Otto Harbach. Hirsch had wanted to be a concert pianist but his efforts turned more practical after early success with several Tin Pan Alley publishing houses. This song, often cited as Hirsch's best, is from the George M. Cohan musical "Mary," which ran for 219 performances on Broadway in 1920. The song may best be remembered because of its long association with George Burns and Gracie Allen. The team used an instrumental version of the song as the theme of their long-running comedy show, from its beginnings on the radio in the mid-thirties until Grace Allen's retirement from television in 1958. Initially, however, the song was popularized by the famous American tenor John Steel and another instrumental version by Joseph C. Smith's Orchestra, both recorded in 1920 for Victor Records. Joseph C. Smith's Orchestra was a fixture at the Plaza Hotel in New York City from 1914-1923; Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda were frequent guests during 1920. They would almost certainly have heard Smith and his orchestra play this tune. Though no lyrics appear in the novel, it seems clear that perhaps Fitzgerald meant the use of the song in an ironic way, as it juxtaposes the sweet concept of a small, cosy house for lovers with Daisy's first glimpse of the huge mansion Gatsby has procured for her delight.

Ask students:

1. Point out that the Roaring Twenties is just getting started as this song becomes popular. Where do we see the post-war optimism and faith in the American dream that was characteristic of the period?

2. What other aspects of the song, lyrically or musically, place it in a post-war America?
3. In the John Steel version, does the singer's delivery, tone, and enunciation mirror the song's words and spirit? Why or why not?

Questions for novel study:

4. At what point in the novel's narrative does this song appear?
5. Why is this an appropriate song at this point? Why would Fitzgerald have chosen to include it as one of the songs Klipspringer selects at the behest of his host, Gatsby?
6. Is there anything we know about Gatsby so far that mirrors the sentiment in the song?
7. Can you imagine Gatsby hearing this song on the radio and making a connection to it? Why or why not? Would Nick make a different connection? Why? What about Daisy?

Lyrics

"The Love Nest" by Otto Harbach and Louis A. Hirsch

<http://www.sheetmusicbackinprint.com/popular/lovenest.html>

Recommended recording(s):

John Steel, 1920 Victor Records:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgm6xrdLiqg>

or

Joseph C. Smith's Orchestra, 1920 Victor Records:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UWAz8KvKZ0Y>

"Three O'Clock in the Morning"

Music by Julian Robledo (1918), words by Dorothy Terriss (aka Theodora Morse), added 1921

Song Background:

This "neat, sad little waltz" was one of the few lasting songs written in part by a female Tin Pan Alley artist. The song was first published in 1918 by Julian Robledo as a tune for solo piano. Terriss added lyrics to it in 1921. It made its debut in the finale of *The Greenwich Follies* and became an instant hit. Paul Whiteman's Orchestra was not the first to record the tune, but his version was a multi-million seller. John McCormack recorded it in 1922 (with lyrics) and the song continued to enjoy immense popularity throughout that year. After character names, the word "time" is the second-most frequently used noun in *The Great Gatsby*. Fitzgerald was, as scholar Matthew Bruccoli observed, a man who "possessed a complex and delicate sense of the passing of the present." This sense informed his novel and has made it a source for historians as well as literary scholars. It comes as no surprise that at this crucial point in the novel, when Daisy first attends one of Gatsby's notorious parties, that Fitzgerald chooses a song in which the passage of time is a central motif. No doubt the title of this song spoke to Fitzgerald on another level as he was writing *The Great Gatsby*, even at this optimistic time in his young life. Much later, after he had dealt with his own alcoholism and the severe mental illness of his beloved wife Zelda, in "The Crack-Up," a searing, intensely personal, three-part essay series for *Esquire* magazine in 1936, Fitzgerald wrote, "...in the real dark night of the soul, it's always three o'clock in the morning, day after day."

Ask students:

1. What is the predominant emotion expressed by the speaker in this song?
2. Are there any aspects of the song, lyrically or musically, that place it in a post-war America?
3. Can you name another familiar tune that has a waltz tempo? How does the waltz tempo contribute to your understanding/enjoyment of the song?

Questions for novel study:

4. At what point in the novel's narrative does this song appear?
5. Why is this an appropriate song at this point? Why would Fitzgerald have chosen to include it at the moment when Daisy is reluctantly leaving Gatsby's party? Consider too the dialogue between Nick and Gatsby after the party is over.
6. Is there anything we know about Gatsby so far that mirrors the sentiment in the song?
7. Can you imagine Gatsby hearing this song on the radio and making a connection to it? Why or why not? Would Nick make a different connection? Why? What about Daisy?

Lyrics

"Three O'Clock in the Morning" by Julian Robledo and Dorothy Terriss available at

http://www.heftone.com/words/three_oclock_in_the_morning.html

Recommended recording(s):

Joseph C. Smith, Victor Records 1920 (earliest recording)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eTi_MW8aUpU

or

Paul Whiteman, Victor 18940, 1922 (most popular during Fitzgerald's time)

<http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/recordings/detail/id/8979>

or

John McCormack, Victrola-66109, 1922 (with lyrics)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCQaZOURnLA>

"The Rosary"

Music by Ethelbert Nevin and words by Robert Cameron Rogers

Song Background:

Composer Ethelbert Nevin was a highly respected and classically trained musician who enjoyed great renown throughout his life as a pianist whose touch could reportedly bring audiences to tears. His reputation grew after his death and he was featured on a ten-cent stamp in 1940. The lyrics were originally published as a poem in 1917 and set to Nevin's tune soon thereafter. Despite its close to 2.4 million copies of sheet music sold through 1924, many reviled this song as a sentimental, maudlin religious song that disparaged a serious subject. This performance of "The Rosary" is by John McCormack, an Irish tenor best known for his ability as a concert performer and incomparable recitalist. He was revered for his lush vocal quality, elegant phrasing, outstanding diction, and remarkable breath support. The use of "The Rosary" at the end of the novel when Nick tries to convince Wolfsheim to attend Gatsby's funeral is almost certainly meant to be ironic. Much has been made about Wolfsheim's Jewishness throughout the book, but Wolfsheim is whistling this Catholic song as he refuses to come to pay his respects to his former friend and business associate.

Ask students:

1. What is the predominant emotion expressed by the speaker in this song?
2. Are there any aspects of the song, lyrically or musically, that place it in a post-war America?
3. How does the performance of this song--the singer's delivery, enunciation, vocal quality, etc.-contribute to your understanding or enjoyment of it?

Questions for novel study:

4. At what point in the novel's narrative does this song appear?

5. Why is this an appropriate song at this point? Why would Fitzgerald have chosen to include it at the moment when Nick is beginning to realize that no one is going to show up for Gatsby's funeral?
6. Can you imagine Gatsby hearing this song on the radio and making a connection to it? Why or why not? Would Nick make a different connection? Why? What about Wolfsheim?

Lyrics

"The Rosary" by Ethelbert Nevin and Robert Cameron Rogers available at

<http://exploreahistory.com/hmarker.php?markerId=1-A-26B>

Recommended Recording:

John McCormack, Victor/HMV no.4-2221, 1920

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vr87G0MbyqM>