

Nicole Trackman
ntrackman@imsa.edu
Illinois Math and Science Academy
The Great Gatsby

Dear Zelda

Abstract:

This talk-show activity is best done after students have read through chapter seven in *The Great Gatsby*. Students will be asked to write a “Dear Zelda” letter- seeking advice for a problem that has come to light in their (the character’s) life. Perhaps Tom would like some marital advice, Wilson may need to learn about the grieving process, Myrtle may ask how she could have communicated with Wilson more productively – and thus avoided her untimely death. It is up to the students to decide what their character needs help with. Students will take the stage and talk out their problems with their host Zelda. Through active engagement and participation, the class will process the characters and conflicts in the book and make predictions about the ending.

Common Core Standards:

- SL.9-10.1a Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.
- SL.9-10.1c Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.
- SL.9-10.1d Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.
- SL.9-10.6 Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.
- RL.9-10.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
- RL.9-10.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).
- W.11-12.2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
- W.11-12.9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Procedure:

1. The students will pick a character's name at random out of a bag. The students will assume the identity of that character for the purpose of this activity.
2. This activity is best done after students have read through chapter seven in the book.
3. Students will be asked to write a "Dear Zelda" letter seeking advice for a problem that has come to light in their (the character's) life. Perhaps, Tom would like some marital advice, Wilson may need to learn about the grieving process, Myrtle may ask how she could have communicated with Wilson more productively and thus avoided her untimely death. It is up to the student to decide what their character needs help with. (See attached document for the full prompt).
4. This activity will work well in a blended classroom. If the class has a web page, the teacher can assign the writing prompt for homework and students can post their work to the online forum. This will make their work accessible to the whole class. When students enter the class, they will have some time to read through the entries.
5. If the class does not have a web page, the teacher can assign students to write their letter for homework and bring it to class the next day. When students enter class, the teacher can break the class into groups of three (different characters are recommended) and students can share their work.
6. Students should enter the next class in character. They should be prepared to speak as and for their character. Students should use their character's language, presumed body language and if possible dressing like the character.
7. The class will be structured as a talk show. The teacher will call up one student to act as Zelda (the host) and offer advice to the worried characters.
8. If the class is online, all students will be able to read through "Dear Zelda" letters and have a reference for the character that takes the stage. Students can either be called up or volunteer to participate. If the class is not online, the groups of three can elect a character to share their letter and take the stage. (Students can share by simply reading their work out loud and/or projecting in through an ELMO). Here is an example of a "Dear Zelda" letter created by a student (see attachment for additional examples):

"Dear Zelda,

Lately, my anger has been growing exponentially as my life falls apart before my eyes. A god-forsaken bootlegger has mettled his way into my marriage, ripping it up by the roots. My wife now questions her love for me even after 5 years of a perfectly good marriage. Plus, it seems every one of my lying friends knew about this uprising, yet failed to mention it to me! In addition, the same devil that has corrupted my wife, hit Myrtle with his car, killing her, and continued to drive to his destination without any remorse. How should I deal with this bootlegger and his horrible crimes toward my life? P.S. I could very easily crush his body like a twig!

- Angered Giant"

9. When students take the stage they will be asked to talk out their problems. For example, Wilson writes to Zelda about learning of Myrtle's infidelity- and/ or her death- he needs advice on how to grieve and/or manage his anger. He comes to sit in the front of the room with Zelda. Zelda provides Wilson with advice- in a role play. Audience members can ask questions and offer advice as well... talk show style.
10. It is important to switch the students acting as Zelda throughout the activity. This will keep students on their toes and ask them to look at the text through a different lens.
11. The conversation can become interesting when a Wilson in the audience has a question/advice for the Wilson on stage... or, if a Gatsby in the audience has a response for the Daisy on stage.
12. The teacher should act as a facilitator, calling up the guests, moving the discussion along, reframing questions and pushing the characters to stay in character and dig into the text for the appropriate responses.
13. The talk show can end with predictions for the ending of the book.

Dear Zelda,

Many layers in *The Great Gatsby* unfold in chapter seven. We have come to know our characters and understand who they are, and how they have developed. As your character, you will write a "Dear Zelda" letter- asking advice for a problem that has come to light in your life. Perhaps, Tom would like some marital advice, Wilson may need to learn about the grieving process, Myrtle may ask how she could have communicated with Wilson more productively – and thus avoided her untimely death. It is up to you to decide what your character needs help with.

You will write your "Dear Zelda" letter for homework and submit it to our online forum so that the rest of the class can read it. We will then spend some time in class sharing advice and perhaps solving some problems in the lives of our characters.

Here are some student examples:

Dear Zelda,

I've been extremely conflicted lately. I have many decisions to make and many problems to deal with. One of my main decisions to make is to choose between the two men in my life- Gatsby and Tom.

Gatsby captured my attention many years ago and still loves me very much, yet I'm married to Tom and I had a daughter, Pammy, with him. Tom does not give me the respect I deserve and does not love me as he has a mistress in New York and does not even try to hide her from me; however, his social standing is great. I don't know who to choose; this is such a difficult decision! I wish the answer would just come to me...

Gatsby, Nick, Tom, and I took a trip to New York- a terrible mistake. There, Tom confronted Gatsby of his feelings towards me and I started growing closer to Tom and loving Gatsby less. Tom sent me and Gatsby back to Long Island, and I accidentally hit a woman but continued to drive on- this is one of my problems.

Gatsby intends to take the blame for me, and I think I plan on letting him. I'm worried someone will discover I hit her, and I go to jail as a murderer. As guilt-ridden as I am by this, I cannot be sent to jail. Can you give me any guidance on what I should do? Should I let Gatsby take the blame and should I continue to choose Tom over Gatsby?
Daisy

Dear Zelda,

I have recently discovered that the love of my life also loves another... her husband. All those wasted years... it feels as if my entire life, up until this point, has been brutally shattered like a wine glass pinched too tightly by a drunken guest at one of my parties... In your utmost confidentiality, should I continue my relationship with her or should I abandon my dream?

Reply quickly, I am off for a swim...

*Sincerely,
An Old Sport*