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The Great Gatsby Unit

### Connecting Literature and History: Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* Museum Project

#### **Abstract:**

Despite mixed reviews at the time of its 1925 publication, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* has come to be one of the most widely taught American books and has become a popular candidate for the title of the "Great American Novel." Uniquely intertwining social history, biography, and literature, the text challenges readers to understand the culture and history of the Jazz Age and to see its interrelationship with the lives and motivations of the characters, as well as with the author himself. This project encourages students to engage and work closely with one of the historical elements that influenced (and was perhaps influenced by) the author and his book by conceptualizing an interactive exhibit for a fictional museum. It also focuses on skills of collaboration and presentation.

This project should take about a week to develop and present.

#### **Common Core State Standards:**

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.6 Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.9 Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

#### **Procedure:**

1. The research for this project may begin just before the students begin reading the novel. By the time the project is over, you will want the class to have finished the book so that they can plumb it for quotations and supporting evidence to use in their exhibit.
2. Divide or allow the students to choose groups of not fewer than three students. Assign (or let them choose) from the topics indicated on the prompt. Feel free to be selective in the assigning of topics.
3. Follow the prompt [Appendix A], allowing students some time in class after discussions or other activities to work with their groups and develop their project. Note that the prompt requires a visual element to their presentation – this can be as simple as a diorama, but some students have used PowerPoint or other presentation software to show the layout or blueprint of their exhibits. A very popular program with my students (and one I encourage them to use) has been Google Sketchup, a fairly accessible (and more importantly, free) 3D modeling software.
4. Have a brief discussion about the nature of "interactive" museum elements, asking students to describe museum exhibits they have seen and to describe whether they were more observers or participants in them. Most will acknowledge that they were far more interested by the interactive exhibits. Emphasize the importance of making the exhibits in their projects interactive.

5. Allow at least one (and probably two) class periods for the students to present their museum projects.
6. In evaluating the presentations, look for the degree to which the students are able to connect the history to the novel. Stronger presentations nearly always include cited historical research in addition to quoted passages from the text. Weaker presentations tend to speak only in vague terms of these connections.

**Materials:**

Copies of the text.

## APPENDIX A

### PROMPT

In this activity, your small group is tasked with creating an exhibit for the planned F. Scott Fitzgerald Museum in his home town of St. Paul, Minnesota. As a new museum, the emphasis of the exhibits is not merely on displaying artifacts, but on creating an immersive, interactive experience for the museum's visitors.

Because Fitzgerald's life, writing, and the era of the Twenties are so intertwined, the Museum Director wants all exhibits to strive to emphasize connections between these things in all elements of their design. The Director also believes that Fitzgerald's writings have strong resonance today, so your exhibit shouldn't shy away from making modern connections that explain why the book (and museum) are important not just to people from the 1920's, but to a modern audience.

The museum will be designed so that visitors move through it in a specific order; keep in mind the exhibits that visitors will come from before yours and go to after yours -- they may help in how you plan your exhibit. The sequence is:

1. Major Events -- in the US and World.
2. Music and Dance
3. Sports and Sports Stars
4. Organized Crime
5. Movies and Movie Stars
6. Romance, Courtship, and Love
7. The Life of Woman
8. The Rich and the Economy

Per the museum's Mission Statement, each exhibit needs to incorporate:

- A. Historic Research and Facts
- B. Quoted text from Fitzgerald's works
- C. An interactive element.
- D. (Optional) A connection to the American Dream

Although *all group members are responsible for all elements and will no doubt share duties*, some group members have specific roles and oversee specific parts of the exhibit. Volunteer for (or assign) these roles within your group:

- A. Executive Writer -- Writes the final copy of all original written parts of the exhibit (and presentation to the class).
- B. Head Researcher -- Finds historic facts and artifacts to include in the exhibit (and presentation to the class).
- C. Lead Designer -- Creates the layout or blueprint of the exhibit, considering elements like room dimensions, lighting, and placement of displays (and presents this diagram to the class)

You will present your exhibit to the class, and as a class we will select the best exhibits based on their level of research, creativity, interactivity, and fulfillment of the requirements of the Mission Statement.