

Pulling Yourself Up By Your Own Boot-straps: Exploring the American Dream with Charles Sheeler's *American Landscape* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's Short Story "Winter Dreams"

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Introduction

Both Sheeler's *American Landscape* and Fitzgerald's short story, "Winter Dreams" embody the impact of modernism on the arts in the early 20th century. Using both creative works, this lesson will explore the modern concept of "The American Dream" and its economic roots which in many ways are linked to the industrialization and urbanization of the modern era.

Guiding Questions

- What are the qualities of the modern American Dream?
- What is modernism as an artistic movement?
- How did the modern American Dream and modernism impact the art and literature of the early 20th century?

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, the students will be able to:

- Discuss the definition and qualities of the modern American Dream and the creative movement known as modernism.
- Identify and briefly discuss some of the historical events that influenced the art and writing of the early 20th century in America.
- Recognize the connection between the artwork and writing of the time period.
- Find and present connections between the works studied in class and additional creative works researched by the students.

Background Information for the Teacher

The elements of modernism that this lesson will focus on are:

A definitive break with earlier, more tradition forms and ideas.
A belief that there is no absolute order to the world.

A belief that reality is dependent on the individual's perception of the world.
The alienation and isolation of the individual versus the larger impersonal forces of society.

Activities

Day One

The American Dream

Tell the students that you are going to project (or write on the board) a familiar phrase, and you want them to jot down the first 3-5 words or phrases that come to mind. After writing/projecting the words "The American Dream" on the board, give the students about 3-5 minutes to complete this step. Discuss their reaction to the phrase. The idea of the "white picket fence" ideal should be included in this discussion

Discussion questions:

- What does the "white picket fence" represent?
- How does it tie in with economic success in the United States today? Historically?
- How does a person achieve "The American Dream"?
- Can everyone achieve the American Dream?

Lead this to a discussion of views of "rugged individualism" and how this was a part of the traditional agrarian lifestyle that dominated the American Dream through the 1890s. Introduce and explain the phrase "to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" to achieve the Dream, and ask if this possible – both literally and figuratively. Challenge them to try to physically pull themselves up by their own "bootstraps." My rules are they have to lie on their backs with knees bent and feet remaining flat on the floor. They must grasp their "book straps" or the backs of their shoes and, using only that (no elbows), they must pull themselves up to a standing position. After they have tried to complete this (it's practically impossible), discuss the reality of whether it is possible for the individual to achieve the American Dream and the obstacles that might keep the individual from reaching it - and the ways someone might overcome the obstacles (perhaps team-work).

Relating the American Dream to Charles Sheeler's *American Landscape*

Present Sheeler's *American Landscape* and discuss the image. Tell the students "In 1880, workers in agriculture outnumbered industrial workers three to one, but by 1920, the numbers were approximately equal. Employment in the manufacturing sector expanded four-fold from 2.5 to 10 million workers from 1880 to 1920" (Hirschman 898).

Discussion questions (others can be found in the Picturing America companion guide):

- What are the dominant features of the landscape?
- What emotions does this image elicit in the viewer?
- Why would Sheeler combine these images and this title?

- How might this relate to the American Dream?

Try and help them find both the beauty in the composition as well as some of the harsher industrial and impersonal aspects of the factory. Use the title to talk about the “American Dream” and its economic root which in many ways is linked to the industrialization of the modern era. This leads us back to the painting and the understanding that the American Dream is dependant on the all the elements of the modern age: teamwork vs. the individual, urban life vs. rural life, an industrial reality vs. an agrarian one, and reality vs. illusion.

Modernism

Introduce the elements of modernism as an artistic movement and tell them that they will be reading a short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald called “Winter Dreams.” Ask them to look for the elements of Modernism, as well as whether Dexter Green, the protagonist, achieves the American Dream.

Review and Apply

Day Two

Present Sheeler’s landscape again and ask the students to review the elements of modernism that they see in the painting. Then discuss how those same features would be found in “Winter Dreams.”

Discussion questions:

- How is the protagonist’s “winter dream” related to the American Dream?
- What are some examples of feelings of alienation or isolation experiences by the characters in the story?
- Why does Fitzgerald end the story the way he does? Why does he not “live happily ever after”?
- How do the losses and gains of the protagonist’s dreams correspond to the reality and illusion of modern life and the American Dream?

Assessment

Have students form groups to find additional artworks (painting, photography, architecture, etc.) in print or on-line using websites, such as CAMIO, that represent the elements of modernism. Each group must present their artwork represents the elements of modernism and the modern interpretation of the American Dream.

Works Cited

Hirschman, Charles, and Mogford, Elizabeth. “Immigration and the American industrial revolution from 1880 to 1920.” *Social Science Research*, 38. 2009. April 10, 2010. Web.

Resources

CAMIO: <http://camio.oclc.org>

Research and Documentation Online: <http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc>

History Net: <http://www.thehistorynet.com>