

Lesson Plan
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Picturing America Collaborative Conference
Newberry Library, April 16-17

Concept: The Shift to Modern Realism in Literature during the Gilded Age. Lesson designed to introduce the reading of *The Great Gatsby*.

Guiding Question:

How can Tiffany's "Autumn Landscape-The River of Life" provide a window to understanding the effects of the Gilded Age (1865-1901) on American literature and poetry?

Background Information and Narrative:

Louis Comfort Tiffany was born in New York, the son of the affluent founder of the famous jewelry store, Tiffany & Co. His ornate stained glass crafts and entrepreneurial spirit typify the prosperity of the Gilded Age.

During the Gilded Age (1865-1901), American literature and art shifted its mood from one of Romanticism to Realism. Works such as *Leaves of Grass*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *My Antonia*, *The Awakening*, and the poetry of Dickinson are evidence of this shift, as aspects of the genteel and romantic are still portrayed while topics previously considered inappropriate are breached with daring. Dickinson's fixation with nature and God's role in human life mimics literature of Transcendentalist writers Thoreau and Emerson; however, her poetry breaks conventional verse constraints and depicts an empowered rather than common voice, rebelling against the control of unseen forces and cruelty of war and death.

As American wealth grew and American pursuit of it became bolder, writers mirrored that boldness and sometimes the outrage at the corruption that industrialization's "money grab" and greed brought. The urbanization of the American landscape was shown in rougher villainous characters, harder language and sharper symbolism. Willa Cather's hard-working disadvantaged inhabitants of the West, struggling to gain a toe-hold in the new American dream, remind us of the ten million American immigrants of the Gilded Age who arrived to political corruption and conditions such as the slums of Hell's Kitchen in New York.

A stark contrast to the optimistic opulence of the Gilded Age elite is shown in Mark Twain's social satires depicting prevailing poverty and racism, Post-Reconstruction, in the midst of the American boom. Mark Twain's and Charles Dudley Warner's book *The Gilded Age: a Tale of Today*, coined the term "Gilded Age" to describe the gratuitous excess of the wealthy and political corruption of government in the period. Disillusionment with that orgy of excess and its emptiness in the later decade of the Roaring Twenties would show in the lives and works of writers Fitzgerald and Hemingway who display brutal realism in their novels' language and themes, the shift complete.

Key Vocabulary:

Art Nouveau- a design style of late 19th century origin characterized by sinuous lines and foliate forms, meaning "new art" in French

Arts & Crafts Movement- A movement originating in Eng and which flourished in the United States from about 1870-1920 characterized by simplicity of design, hand-crafted objects, and use of local materials

Gilded Age- refers to a period in the late 19th century of substantial growth in population in the United States marked by extravagant displays of wealth in America's upper class

Industrialism- social organization in which industries and especially large-scale industries are dominant

Realism- the theory or practice of fidelity in art and literature to nature or to real life and to accurate representation without idealization

Reconstruction- the reorganization of the seceded states in the union after the American Civil War

Romanticism- A literary, artistic and philosophical movement characterized chiefly by a reaction against neoclassicism and an emphasis on imagination and emotions, the exaltation of the common man, an appreciation of external nature, an interest in the remote, a predilection for melancholy, and the use of poetry in older verse forms.

Transcendentalism- a philosophy that asserts the primacy of spiritual over the material

Urbanization-the process of becoming urbanized or less rural

Performance tasks/activities:

A. Read the poem by Emily Dickinson "Part Four: Time and Eternity XLII" on the page of Dickinson poems provided, notice the last stanza in particular. View Louis Comfort Tiffany's stained glass artwork "Autumn Landscape-River of Life". Read the definitions provided for Romanticism and Realism.

- What does "autumn" symbolize for both the poet and the artist?
- Discuss whether Tiffany's "Autumn Landscape" and Dickinson's poem "Time and Eternity" present Realistic views or Romantic views of spirituality? Give examples of what you think represents a Realistic view and what represents a Romantic view.

B. Louis Comfort Tiffany lived and worked during the Gilded Age period. He was born to wealthy parents who owned New York's Tiffany & Co but was a self-made success choosing not to follow in his father's footsteps as a jeweler. His art work is typical of the opulence of the period. The term Gilded Age, coined by Twain and Warner comes from "To gild refined gold, to paint the lily" in Shakespeare's play *King John*. It is used to describe wasteful and excessive characteristics of the day. Tiffany's lamps and stained glass were priced to be available to only moneyed buyers, so they were considered a beautiful luxury.

Read the remainder of the definitions provided. Read the "Introduction" from *The Gilded Age: a History in Documents* by Janette Thomas Greenwood. Read paragraphs numbered 3 & 4 on the page containing the excerpt from the preface to *The Great Gatsby* by Matthew J. Bruccoli.

- How does "money and material success" play a large role in the descriptions by Bruccoli of *The Great Gatsby* and in the period in history known as The Gilded Age?

C. Emily Dickinson has been called a Gilded Age poet. Read paragraphs numbered 1 & 2 on the excerpt from the preface to *The Great Gatsby* by Matthew J. Bruccoli. Read "Part Four: Time and Eternity LVIII" and "Part One: Life I" on the page of Dickinson poems provided. In Part Four: Time and Eternity LVIII, Dickinson describes death as the great equalizer ("to the same pageant wends its way"). In Part One: Life I, the poet describes success like a thirst.

- In what way does the theme of "time" in the poems by Dickinson and in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* have to do with loss and death?

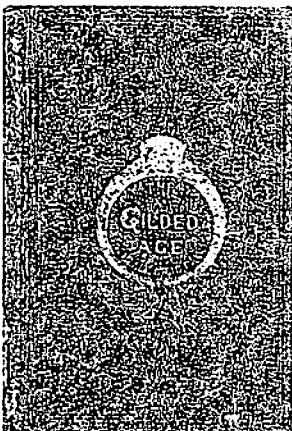
The Gilded Age was one that saw "great wealth" and "great poverty" and deep disparity between social classes. Gatsby is envious of the privileged life of Daisy.

- Describe Dickinson's use of "Pompless" and "The lowliest career" in these terms.
- While Gatsby becomes rich through "unconventional means" in Fitzgerald's novel, what is the "right currency" that he is missing, according to Bruccoli? How does Gilded Age social activism relate?

Assessment:

Students submit answers to bulleted questions on paper, then as a group, then in class discussion.

Introduction



Co-authored by Charles Dudley Warner and Mark Twain, the novel *The Gilded Age—A Tale of Today* furnished the name for an era in American history marked by excess, corruption, and materialism.

An illustration from Warner and Twain's *The Gilded Age*, showing buckster Colonel Sellers enticing Washington Hawkins with visions of fabulous riches. "The colonel's tongue was a magician's wand that turned dried apples into figs and water into wine as easily as it could change a bovel into a palace. . . ."

Since 1873, when Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner published their satirical novel *The Gilded Age*, Americans have used the term to designate a distinctive period, the last quarter of the 19th century. The Gilded Age proved to be a resilient designation because it seemed to fit so well. Twain and Warner's novel scathingly satirized post-Civil War America as a land of craven materialism as well as hopelessly corrupt political practices. The United States indeed seemed to be gilded—covered with gold—in limitless moneymaking enterprises and business possibilities. But the gold casing often proved to be a thin veneer, covering up an uglier society—one of crass greed and excess.

For many years historians accepted Twain and Warner's characterization of the post-Civil War United States, an era dominated by robber barons—industrial leaders who fleeced a vulnerable public through questionable business practices—and fat cat political bosses who dispensed favors while lining their pockets with payoffs.

But robber barons and political bosses are only part of the story of the Gilded Age. As Twain and Warner suggested, it was indeed an era of extremes—a time of rapid industrialization coupled with cycles of crushing unemployment, of both unprecedented wealth and dire poverty. It was also an era of opportunity for millions of European immigrants who poured into the nation just as certain native-born groups, particularly African Americans and Native Americans, bore the brunt of racially motivated violence. It was also an era in which the downtrodden fought back, demanding that the United States live up to its ideals of equality before the law and justice for all, which had been lost in a flurry of industrialization and unprecedented concentrations of wealth and power in the hands of a few. It was a time when their loss kindled a blaze of social activism.

Excerpt from the Preface by Matthew J. Bruccoli to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, 75th Anniversary Ed., pages 9-12, 1992.

1 It is appropriate and utilitarian that *The Great Gatsby* have an "intricately patterned" chronology, for time is a major theme in the novel and in all of Fitzgerald's best fiction. The novel begins "In my younger and more vulnerable years..." and ends "borne back ceaselessly into the past." It uses some 450 time-words, including 87 appearances of *time*. Episodes are reinforced by time symbolism: the famous list of people who attended Gatsby's parties is written on a timetable; Gatsby knocks over a clock during his reunion with Daisy; and Klipspringer plays "In the meantime, In between time —".

2 The time theme encompasses the related themes of mutability and loss. Fitzgerald wrote in 1924 while he was working on *Gatsby*: "That's the whole burden of this novel—the loss of those illusions that give such color to the world so that you don't care whether things are true or false as long as they partake of the magical glory."

3 An essential aspect of the American-ness and the historicity of *The Great Gatsby* is that it is about money. The Land of Opportunity promised the chance for financial success. Gatsby, who makes his fortune in ways never envisioned by Benjamin Franklin, does not understand how money works in society. He innocently expects that he can buy anything—especially Daisy. She is for sale, but he doesn't have the right currency.

4 It has become convenient to refer to *The Great Gatsby* as "the great American novel." If this phrase means anything, it means that the novel is the great work

of fiction with defining American thematic qualities and that James Gatz, 'Jay Gatsby is the great American character (Adherents of Huck Finn take issue and umbrage.) Gatsby is the American self-made—indeed, self-invented—man. He believes in the American Dream of success ("the orgasmic future"); he fulfills it; he confuses it with Daisy; he is betrayed by it. The appellation *great* as applied to Gatsby reverberates with irony. He is truly great by virtue of his capacity to commit himself to his aspirations. Yet at the same time the adjective indicates the tawdry and exaggerated aspects of his life: Hurry, hurry, hurry! Step right up and see the Great Gatsby! (Tom Buchanan describes Gatsby's car as a "circus wagon.") It is crucial to differentiate the ostentatious Gatsby from the admirable Gatsby. Thus Nick instructs the reader in the fourth paragraph of the novel.

If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away. This responsiveness had nothing to do with that flabby impressionability which is dignified under the name of the "creative temperament"—it was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again.

embedded in the surface) for its shifting colors of the autumn foliage, marbled glass for the boulders, rippled glass for the foreground pool. To deepen the color and enhance the depth of the distant mountains, Tiffany applied layers of glass to the back of the window, a technique called "plating." But as he would have been aware, the full effect of the window depended on the intensity of the natural light that shone through it to magically alter the landscape throughout the day and the year.

As a window that resembles an elaborately framed easel painting, *Autumn Landscape* fulfills the aesthetic movement's mission of introducing art into daily life. Like his contemporary James McNeill Whistler, who is often regarded as the movement's leading American exponent (see 11-B), Tiffany concentrated himself with the entire range of a room's decorative effects, weaving them into a single, harmonious design. He found countless ways to give his art a practical purpose, designing everything from books to furniture. "I discovered early in my life," he said, "his primary concern is that always bears simply the pursuit of beauty."

13-B Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848–1913), *Autumn Landscape—The River of Life*, 1923–1924, Tiffany Studios (1902–1938). Leaded Favrile glass window, 11 ft. x 8 ft. 6 in. (335.3 x 259.1 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Robert W. de Forest, 1925 (25.173). Photograph © 1997 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Emily Dickinson (1830-86). Complete Poems. 1924.

Part Four: Time and Eternity

L.VIII

POMPLESS no life can pass away;
The lowliest career
To the same pageant wends its way
As that exalted here.
How cordial is the mystery!
The hospitable pall
A "this way" beckons spaciously.
A miracle for all!

Emily Dickinson (1830-86). Complete Poems. 1924.

Part One: Life

I

SUCCESS is counted sweetest
By those who ne'er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple host
Who took the flag to-day
Can tell the definition,
So clear, of victory,

As he, defeated, dying,
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Break, agonized and clear.

Emily Dickinson (1830-86). Complete Poems. 1924.

Part Four: Time and Eternity

XLIH

GOING to heaven!
I don't know when,
Pray do not ask me how,
Indeed, I 'm too astonished
To think of answering you!
Going to heaven!--
How dim it sounds!
And yet it will be done
As sure as flocks go home at night
Unto the shepherd's arm!

Perhaps you 're going too!
Who knows?
If you should get there first,
Save just a little place for me
Close to the two I lost!
The smallest "robe" will fit me,
And just a bit of "crown";
For you know we do not mind our dress
When we are going home.

I 'm glad I don't believe it,
For it would stop my breath,
And I 'd like to look a little more
At such a curious earth!
I am glad they did believe it
Whom I have never found
Since the mighty autumn afternoon
I left them in the ground.

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