Jillian Walker Literary Analysis Honors Project

Dreamers, Identity, and Literature: Questioning the American Dream Narrative via Two Novels

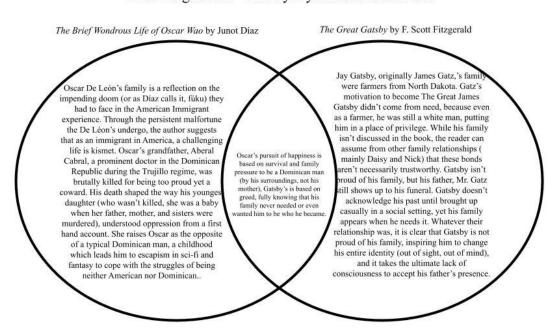
Project Description:

In this project, I will be reading and analyzing *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz, and comparing the different narratives of the American Dream told in this story vs. *The Great Gatsby*. I will use my knowledge of these two books, and work to understand different perspectives of what The American Dream looks like. When we read *The Great Gatsby* last trimester, I became obsessed with the idea of the "American Dream" and the Great American novel, so I was wondering if there was a project where I could compare different versions of the same story, and understand different stories based around the same lie. By comparing these two novels, I can question if there is an American Dream at all, using my final thesis from *The Great Gatsby*. I hope to strengthen my critical thinking skills, and give myself an introduction into the field of comparative literature. I also hope to gain an understanding of what America and "The American Dream" is like for rich white men (such as in Gatsby), versus in an immigrant family).

Final Product:

Instead of a traditional analytical essay, my final product is a series of Venn Diagrams, each reflecting on a branch of the American Dream and American society as a whole.

Venn Diagram #1 - Family Dynamic and Pressure



Venn Diagram #2 - Love

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao by Junot Díaz

The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald

Before Oscar hit puberty, he was known by his family and neighborhood as the handsome player, with two girlfriends at once. As he developed into a teenager and grew away from the Dominican cultural pressure to date around, he became entirely undesired by every girl he liked. His dream contracts from sexual conquest to any sexual interaction. Oscar has a lot of crushes and develops them quickly, and prefers the obsession of different girls to the attainment. This pattern is a metaphor for the American Dream, that the pursuit is more exciting than the achievement. When Oscar finally visits the Dominican Republic, he undertakes a much more common perspective on love. He falls madly for Yibon, a prostitute whos boyfriend is a police officer. The books' narrator, Yuñior, focuses on Oscar's desire to has sex, and he finally has it with Yibon. However, Yibon's boyfriend finds out and after an already terrible beating where he left DR, Oscar returns for Yibon. Her boyfriend and his guards kill Oscar, proving that he would take his delusion to the grave.

Both Oscar and Gatsby's obsession and love for one woman leads them to their deaths.

Gatsby's love for Daisy is unromantic. obsessive, and based in greed rather than genuine affection. Gatsby's five year pursuit of her is a near futile attempt at reliving the past, when romance was true. Even in the past, their romance is questionable, as Gatsby is truly in love with the money Daisy epresents instead of Daisy herself. Daisy's character was written to enforce sexist tereotypes in that her only traits are being frail, beautiful, and a prize for Tom and atsby to win. While waiting for her to call. Gatsby gets shot in his pool and dies, ymbolizing drowning in his own greed. He brought is death upon himself by his unsuccessful pursuit of Daisy, which suggests the narrative that the American Dream is never real or worth the sacrifice.

Venn Diagram #3 - Success

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao by Junot Díaz

The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald

Oscar's dream was based in romance, where his ultimate desire was sexual pleasure with a woman. He fulfills this desire with Yibon, but faces the consequence with the price of death ordered by her boyfriend, el Capitan. Oscar's American Dream is not based in greed or the rags to riches narrative, but rather in passion, which is why he achieves it.

Gatsby and Oscar both achieve some version of the American Dream (Oscar's being authentically his own). Gatsby's achievement is mostly material, whereas Oscar's is based on experience. Gatsby dies unfulfilled and wanting more, Oscar dies scared, in pain, but satisfied. The true American Dream was based in the rags to riches narrative, but to actually achieve happiness after prsuit, the ultimate goal cannot be a physical object.

Gatsby was known for his material possessions (house, parties, car), but not much else. He spent five years lying to himself that he was pursuing Daisy, but instead, he was pursuing the wealth, shallowness, and materialism she represents. He dies unhappy and not achieving his dream, because it was so fundamentally based in greed and fitting into one role as perceived by others rather than satisfying himself to his own standard.

Final Reflection:

My big question was: Will Oscar achieve the American Dream? The answer is yes. However, in doing this project, I realized Oscar's experience in the pursuit of the American Dream is authentically his own. What this made me see is that the American Dream may not be as much a checklist of things to achieve or a standard to meet, as a style and an ethos underlying one's beliefs and expectations. In this sense, Oscar De León's pursuit and achievement of the American Dream is a greater reflection on the immigrant experience. Oscar's interests, desires and wants are very idiosyncratic and "geeky." He is described as a nerd. But he is also individualistic and has a very specific expectation of the American Dream that is unique to him. Seeing this made me realize that from an immigrant perspective, the American Dream can only be described "to each his (or her) own." In contrast to this immigrant perspective, *The Great* Gatsby tells us that the American Dream is entirely unattainable. That being said, this was a book written by a white man in a place of privilege one hundred years ago and excluded everybody who didn't live in the East or West Egg. This perspective is outdated and non inclusive of so many groups of people. What this tells us is that the rags to riches narrative, that if you work hard enough, anything is possible is truly unattainable. But, when that narrative is amended to fit one's own story, that version of the American Dream is the one that will be pursued, achieved, and remembered.