

## *The Great Gatsby & Media Literacy*

David Jennis

### **Abstract**

This curriculum is about developing background knowledge and basic media literacy skills with *The Great Gatsby* as a comparative text. This unit is designed for an 11th grade class, but may be applied to any secondary classroom. The examples and activities featured use *The Great Gatsby* as a background text, but a different text may be substituted to achieve the same goals. Students will gain historical context and media vocabulary in order to critically analyze film as well as create a basic script and storyboard for their own “film.”

### **Rationale**

The students in my 9-12 high school are well versed in how to access and consume media of all varieties, but lack some of the fundamental skills required to critically understand and interpret the *language* of media. Kensington High school is a relatively small, urban, school comprised of primarily African American and Latino students. Despite the economic challenges faced by many families in the school, access to internet and devices capable of interactivity seem to be nearly ubiquitous. Additionally, the school has a substantial collection of laptops and desktops spread across classrooms in major subject areas and electives. Regardless of English language proficiency, economic background, cultural background, or academic capability, I have yet to encounter a student who was unable to search for and digest digital media of some shape or form. Yet, despite all of their technological savvy, students lack a fundamental understanding of the historical, cultural, economic, and political influence of entertainment as well as the literacy required to critically analyze these aspects of this ubiquitous media.

As a current member of the Directors Guild of America, and a former entertainment professional for over ten years, I firmly believe that students require a basic understanding of the historical, cultural, economic, and political influence of the entertainment that they consume at home, in theatres, in classrooms, or walking down the hallway. The unit will focus on developing the specialized vocabulary and knowledge that students need to become media literate. The unit will begin by establishing a common language for students to use to observe, identify, and discuss digital media. Throughout the unit, students will use technical language in

order to critically analyze media through informal classroom discussions and formal written reports. The unit will use internet databases (<https://filmanalysis.coursepress.yale.edu/basic-terms/>) as well as clips from television & film to illustrate basic concepts. Students will be required to investigate media on the web to provide evidence of understanding and mastery of these vocabulary concepts.

Once the class has established a common language to use to discuss film and media, there will be an investigation in the history and use of genre. Students are most likely familiar with genre films, but lack an understanding of how and why they came to be. Students will learn the history of, development of, and continued use of genre as a means to engage certain audiences. Students will be able to use objective definitions and lists to identify genres like westerns, musicals, romantic comedy, and science fiction. Students will use this knowledge to critically analyze the development and use of genres as a means to control viewer's expectations and engage audiences in political discourse. Students will also explore crossover and mixed genre titles such as *Firefly* in effort to ultimately determine what genre or blend of genres are most popular among their peers and analyze why that might be the case.

Citing textual evidence to support an argument is one of the most important standards in the ELA curriculum, and as such, this unit will pay particular attention to student's abilities to use entertainment as part of a larger discourse about media's place in American society. Students will use their knowledge of technical vocabulary, hollywood history, and genre to critically analyze the influential role of film and television in their everyday lives.

## **Background**

Media has the undeniable potential to entertain, delight, and engage audiences from all socioeconomic backgrounds in a democratic dialogue. Recent studies suggest that young people are using the Media to define their understanding of the races, religions, and sexuality of those that surround them in ways that may be very harmful in their future interactions with those individuals (Jolls & Wilson, 2014; Redmond, 2015) . Media shows no signs of disappearing from our daily lives and will undoubtedly be a major factor in the future, professional endeavors of the increasingly globalized workforce with which we hope our students will compete. As such, we must recognize the significance of Media Literacy Education (MLE) and its role in

preparing students to critically analyze and interpret the symbolic language of the Media that surrounds them.

Media Literacy programs are often taught on the outskirts of American curriculums, or incorporated within other subject areas entirely, and so there is often confusion and misunderstanding in the realm of institutionalized instruction (Jolls & Wilson, 2014). It is therefore essential to begin with a brief explanation of the foundational concepts of MLE. For many, the notion of literacy brings to mind a fundamental concept of reading and writing: If you can read and write then you are literate. Founders of the Media Literacy movement recognized that students would require educational framework to deconstruct and interpret Media separate from typical literacy instruction. Len Masterman is widely regarded as one of the most influential figures in the establishment of a disciplined and structured approach to understanding Media and describes it as a system of representational signs or symbols that need to be decoded (as cited in Jolls & Wilson, 2014). In this way, we understand that Media functions in much the same way as any other language. It has its own unique set of symbolic representations that we need to develop an ability to deconstruct, decode, and interpret in order to be literate. If we want to understand the ways that our students can approach Media in a fluent, engaged, and critical manner, we need to address the way that our educational system has dealt with MLE.

MLE often goes one of two different ways in most American institutions. On one hand, you have a school of thought that has to do with the assumption that students are an *active* audience. As an active audience, we would presume that media is part of a pleasurable experience that students can utilize for expressive value. An example of this might be a lesson plan that involves students using their cell phones to record an interview, and then presenting an edited video alongside an oral presentation. On the other hand, there are many that suggest that students are a much more *passive* audience, and Media should be considered less of a pleasure, and more of a vice (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015).

This other school of thought has to do with using MLE as an intervening tool to mitigate the negative effects of media consumption on an uneducated student populace (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015). Studies that deal with intervention often focus a critical lens on the depiction and representation of race, gender, and sexuality in the Media. Erica Scharrer and

Srividya Ramasubramanian take a hard look at race in their 2015 article *Intervening in the Media's Influence on Stereotypes of Race and Ethnicity: The Role of Media Literacy Education*. Central to their discussion on the influential role that Media plays in forming a picture of racial identity among adolescents is the collection of research and data that has been conducted over the years. Through their analysis of multiple qualitative studies, the authors determine that “media literacy education can promote an understanding of the systematic and structural conditions that shape racial conditions in society,” but also that media literacy “can inadvertently reinforce distinctions between in-groups and out-groups” (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015, p. 178). Their analysis of multiple studies suggests that Media Literacy Education can enhance critical viewing skills and decrease the level to which students perceive multi-media representations as reality. Among the future efforts in Media Literacy Education suggested by the authors in their conclusion are the active participation of students in curriculum development, the utilization of topical and relatable examples from the media, and critical probing of racial and ethnic stereotypes (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015). These are important factors to consider as we continue to look at other ways that MLE impacts students, teachers, and classrooms.

In his work *Teaching the Media*, Len Masterman (1990) describes some of the reasons that teaching Media Literacy is an essential endeavor in our educational system. The seven reasons that he offers for advocating Media Literacy education are worth noting:

1. The high rate of media consumption and *the saturation of contemporary societies by the media*.
2. The ideological importance of the media, and *their influence as consciousness industries*.
3. The growth in the *management and manufacture of information*, and its dissemination by the media.
4. The increasing *penetration of media into our central democratic processes*.
5. The increasing *importance of visual communication and information* in all areas.

6. The importance of *educating students to meet the demands of the future*.
7. The fast-growing national and international pressures to *privatise information*.  
(Masterman, 1990).

Masterman has continued to use these reasons as rationale for a consistent and measurable approach to developing Media Literacy programs and curriculum across the country and across the globe. He echoed these sentiments in a 2010 “Voices of Media Literacy” interview in which he described the challenge of looking at Media in a new way, not as a “mirror which simply reflects reality,” but as symbolic system “produced, edited and packaged” by human agents (Masterman, 2010). The fluctuating abundance of media sources is of particular concern to Masterman and he notes that as Media expands and develops new sophistication, Education must likewise develop an openness and flexibility to change (Masterman, 1990).

As Len Masterman (1990) notes in his list of rationale for critical and engaged Media Literacy programs, Media consumption has reached a point of saturation across the globe to the extent that is difficult to imagine going an hour, let alone a day, without being exposed to sophisticated and complex multimedia messages. The literature demonstrates that the abundance of media enabled technological devices and their presence in the classroom has a definite correlation on student achievement (Duncan et al. 2012). Research indicates that students will use Media to learn about the world, regardless of the instructional intent or validity of the source material (Redmond, 2015). Furthermore, educators increasingly utilize a variety of multimedia sources to provide an instructional basis for complex social and scientific issues (Dani et al., 2010). If we recognize the fact that Media is an unavoidable factor in our students’ daily lives, we must seek to empower them with the tools necessary to engage with, analyze and interpret sophisticated Media texts.

Many scholars have argued that film and media analysis in the classroom setting must move beyond the traditional notion of “free time” or “reward.” So often, teachers use the soothing sights and sounds of familiar media to pacify students, rather than engage them. Using film to approach critical literacy in media however, can allow teachers to engage students in rigorous learning activities. In order to build the foundations of this rigorous learning

opportunity, students must first develop a language to speak, interpret, and synthesize the lessons of film. “Students must therefore understand the language and components of film (e.g., music, images, colors, lighting, camerawork) to think more critically about the explicit and implicit messages films contain” (Domke et al, 2018).

## Objectives

- Identify, define and explain key vocabulary
  - Students will be able to identify, define and explain media related vocabulary including; auteur, diegesis, depth of field, deep focus, shallow focus, rack focus, telephoto, zoom, editing, cutting, flashback, flash forward, focus, genre, mise-en-scene, story, plot, scene, sequence, shot, close up, medium shot, long shot, dolly, pan, tilt, crane
- Analyze historical context
  - Students will be able to identify, categorize, list, and analyze key historical events, figures, and dates including; Thomas Edison, film development, major studios, television, computer graphics, internet, etc.
- Analyze genre
  - Students will be able to identify characteristics of key genres and categorize films according to these characteristics. Furthermore, students will be able to analyze the impact of genre film production on audience expectations and explore the role of genre in marketing and targeting to youth.
- Synthesize
  - Students will be able to construct a detailed analysis of a particular film. Students will demonstrate understanding and mastery of material by synthesizing

information in a detailed written report that explores the aesthetic qualities, historical relevance, and cultural influence of a film.

## Strategies

The overall flow of each lesson will follow a similar pedagogical approach. There will be teacher led instruction (direct instruction), communal activities and discourse (guided instruction), and finally work that students complete independently (independent practice). Individual strategies that may be used throughout each lesson include:

- “Do Now” or “Energizer.” This short activity sets the stage for the day’s lesson. Instructions will be immediately visible to students upon entering the room. The instructions will be brief and the activity should take no longer than 5-7 minutes to complete.
- Frayer Model. This model for vocabulary acquisition asks students to write a definition in their own words, synonyms, uses, and a visual. This will help students acquire domain specific vocabulary for film study / media literacy.
- Visual Organizer. Students will practice using visual organizers to keep track of notes and observations.
- Guided Viewings. Rather than simply sitting down to watch a section of media, students will have guided notes to direct their viewings. The notes will call for objective observations, insights, and questions that arise as they watch media.
- RACE. This constructed response strategy is a way for students to approach critical analysis through a carefully structured formula. R = restate the question, A = answer the question, C = cite evidence, and E = explain the evidence. Students should already have mastered this formula, but will continue to practice it as a way to approach media studies.

**Classroom Activities, Resources & Appendices*****Sample Lesson #1******“Film and Genre”***

**Today’s Objective: What you will teach/What you expect students will learn**

**SWBAT define genre, identify patterns and compare film clips IOT differentiate between genres of film.**

**Example of how students will demonstrate their mastery of the skill/ success toward the objective**

**Do Now**

**Frayer Model**

**Visual Organizer**

**Prompt/Genre Free Write**

**Exit Ticket**

**Lesson Flow**

**1. Do Now: ACTIVITY THAT REQUIRES PARTICIPATION to prepare students to learn the skill/achieve the objective.**

**Do Now: Complete Frayer model work sheet for the terms on the board / handout.**

Students have been working with the Frayer model in class for vocabulary units, and at this point they do not require instructions/modeling for how to complete each section of the model. The vocabulary words will be available in a handout for students to keep at their desks, but they will also be projected at the front of the class on the classroom Smartboard. (Appendix A & B)

**2. Direct Instruction: Teacher models the skill.**

Teacher will review “genre” along with the genres that will be discussed during today’s lesson. In this part of the lesson, the focus will be on the historical context of the genre system.

**3. Guided Practice: Students practice the skill via an ACTIVITY THAT REQUIRES PARTICIPATION.**

Students will receive notes from Peter Decherney’s *Hollywood a very short introduction*, and the class will jigsaw the reading. Each student will be assigned one paragraph to read. Once the students have had an opportunity to complete their reading, we will “popcorn” around the room, and each student will share a one sentence summary of their paragraph.

**4. Check for Understanding: Students produce an artifact that demonstrates their progress toward mastery of the skill.**

Class will view clips from a variety of genres and take notes in order to determine similarities among the genres.

Science Fiction: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hbJrqZaB4oI>

Western: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KNHP8NRbCmI>

Horror: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKTicVgp8zU>

Lead students to understand that there are a variety of cinematic, artistic, and technical devices used for certain genres.

Students will complete a visual organizer as we watch each clip.

Think-Pair-Share: Students will think of similarities within clips for different genres. Then, they will turn to a partner to talk about their observations. Finally, the class will discuss observations and draw conclusions based on the evidence.

#### 5. Independent Practice:

Students will be randomly assigned a prompt and a genre by selecting a slip of paper from one box (prompt) and another box (genre). Students will then consider how they might imagine that prompt or scene portrayed in a particular genre. Students will describe in 6-8 sentences, how that scene would look if it were filmed within the confines of that genre. (Appendix).

#### 6. Closure/Exit Ticket

Exit Ticket: Please respond to the following in 2-3 sentences. Based on your prompt and your genre, who do you think would be most likely to see a film like the one that you just described? Why?

## *Sample Lesson #2*

*“How does film create mood?”*

**Today’s Objective: What you will teach/What you expect students will learn**

**SWBAT identify and define media/film specific vocabulary IOT investigate a short clip from *The Great Gatsby* (2013) and draw conclusions regarding the use of technical and artistic devices.**

**Example of how students will demonstrate their mastery of the skill/ success toward the objective**

**Do Now**

**Framer Model**

**Film clip analysis**

**Visual Organizer**

**RACE constructed response**

### **Lesson Flow**

**1. Do Now: ACTIVITY THAT REQUIRES PARTICIPATION to prepare students to learn the skill/achieve the objective.**

**Do Now: Complete Frayer model work sheet for the terms on the board / handout.**

Students have been working with the Frayer model in class for vocabulary units, and at this point they do not require instructions/modeling for how to complete each section of the model. The vocabulary words will be available in a handout for students to keep at their desks, but they will also be projected at the front of the class on the classroom Smartboard. (Appendix A & B)

## **2. Direct Instruction: Teacher models the skill.**

Teacher will provide background information for the clip that we are about to watch. For a class that has already been reading *The Great Gatsby*, this may not be necessary. For a class that is unfamiliar with the text, it may be important to briefly explain some of the basic plot; "A man named Gatsby is in love with another man's wife. Gatsby and his love are driving in one car on their way to New York, while the other man, Tom, is in a car with his wife's cousin, Nick, and his friend, Jordan. In this scene, we will see them driving alongside one another."

The class will view the clip (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqA1ISMJJQY>) The clip is approximately two and a half minutes long.

Once we have watched the clip once, the students will create a three column visual organizer in their notebooks and they will label each column, "What I notice," "What I think about," and "What I wonder." An example of the visual organizer will be presented at the front of the room on the classroom Smartboard. Some students may need the columns drawn for them ahead of time so that they can label them on their own. Other students may need the completed visual organizer. (See Appendix C)

**3. Guided Practice: Students practice the skill via an ACTIVITY THAT REQUIRES PARTICIPATION.**

The clip will be presented a 2nd time. This time, the students will fill in at least 3 notes for each column of their visual organizer. Challenge students to use the content specific vocabulary.

After the second viewing, review observations as a class. The teacher will record notes via the interactive feature of the Smartboard.

Objective observations should focus not only on things like character and setting, but also on the various technical devices used throughout the clip (pans, whip pans, edits, soundtrack, etc.)

**4. Check for Understanding: Students produce an artifact that demonstrates their progress toward mastery of the skill.**

Students will be presented with a brief excerpt from *The Great Gatsby* (Appendix D). Students will highlight and/or underline words that help create the mood. Then, students will respond to a brief analysis question. "If sentence structure and word choice create mood in literature, what creates mood in visual art like film?" Students will craft answers individually, and then the class will debrief. Help students to understand that camera movement, editing, and score serve similar functions in film. The choices that filmmakers make and the combination of these things can create tense, suspenseful moods.

**5. Independent Practice:**

Students watch the clip a third time in order to respond to the following prompt:

What mood is created through the various technical and artistic devices employed in this clip from *The Great Gatsby*?

Students should use RACE model for constructed response in a well composed 6-8 sentence response.

#### 6. Closure/Exit Ticket

Stoplight:

Submit one of the following words on a piece of paper in order to indicate your understanding of artistic and technical devices used in film to create mood.

Red = I am lost in the sauce.

Yellow = I think I get it, but I could use some more practice. Maybe a different clip would help.

Green = I've got this!

## *Sample Lesson #3*

*"Put it together"*

Today's Objective: What you will teach/What you expect students will learn

SWBAT compose and construct a short script and storyboard IOT synthesize concepts of film literacy and genre.

**Example of how students will demonstrate their mastery of the skill/ success toward the objective**

**Do Now**

**Genre brainstorm**

**Scene selection**

**Genre reimagining storyboard.**

### **Lesson Flow**

**1. Do Now: ACTIVITY THAT REQUIRES PARTICIPATION to prepare students to learn the skill/achieve the objective.**

**Think about one of your favorite movies or TV shows. What genre would that selection belong to? What about this selection is so appealing to you?**

**2. Direct Instruction: Teacher models the skill.**

**Show a short clip of the television show *Firefly*. Describe to students the melding of styles and genres (sci-fi and western).**

**3. Guided Practice: Students practice the skill via an ACTIVITY THAT REQUIRES PARTICIPATION.**

Students will make a list of the qualities of the example that belong to the science fiction genre and those that belong to the western genre.

**4. Check for Understanding:** Students produce an artifact that demonstrates their progress toward mastery of the skill.

Students will use the genre that they described during the do now for this activity. Students will select a scene from *The Great Gatsby* and imagine that scene taking place within a genre film of their choice. Students will compose a short script for that scene. The scene may use existing dialogue as well as new dialogue. Show students an example of a script. Scripts will focus primarily on dialogue, with short visual descriptions.

**5. Independent Practice:**

Students will storyboard their scene in a minimum of six frames. Each frame must contain a unique example of how that scene works within their selected genre. Each frame must include a detailed description of visual aesthetics through at least one vocabulary word developed as part of this unit. The teacher will provide a model for the students.

**6. Closure/Exit Ticket**

**Reflect:**

What is the most difficult aspect of reimagining this text in a new genre? Why?



## Appendix A: Film Vocabulary

### Lesson #1

**Genre:** a category of film defined by similarities in form, style, or subject matter.

**Western:** A genre of film which typically tells a story set in the American West and involves characters such as cowboys, native americans, bandits, lawmen, etc. Often set in harsh, desolate environments.

**Science Fiction:** A genre of film which typically tells stories of imagined futuristic societies, frequently portraying space travel and life on other planets.

**Horror:** A genre of film which is typically intended to frighten or scare the audience through terrifying or disgusting characters and settings.

**Pan:** refers to the horizontal scan, movement, rotation or turning of the camera in one direction (to the right or left) around a fixed vertical axis.

**Whip Pan:** The camera is purposely panned in either direction at a very fast pace, creating the impression of a fast-moving horizontal blurring of images across the screen.

**Edit / Cut:** Selecting, assembling, arranging, collating, trimming, structuring, and splicing-joining together many separate camera takes.

**Score / Soundtrack:** The musical component of a movie's soundtrack, usually composed specifically for the film by a film composer; the background music in a film, usually specially composed for the film; may be orchestral, synthesized, or performed by a small group of musicians; also refers to the act of writing music for a film

<http://www.filmsite.org/filmterms17.html>

## Appendix B: Frayer Model

Name:

|   |   |
|---|---|
| YOUR definition (not Merriam's definition!) | Create a visual to show the meaning of the word |
| <b>New Word:</b>                            |   |
| <u>Example</u>                              | <u>Non-Example</u>                              |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| YOUR definition (not Merriam's definition!) | Create a visual to show the meaning of the word |
| <b>New Word:</b>                            |   |

|                |                    |
|----------------|--------------------|
| <u>Example</u> | <u>Non-example</u> |
|----------------|--------------------|

## Appendix C: Visual Organizer

| What I notice | What I think about | What I wonder |
|---------------|--------------------|---------------|
| 1.            | 1.                 | 1.            |
| 2.            | 2.                 | 2.            |
| 3.            | 3.                 | 3.            |

## Appendix: Prompts &amp; Genres

Cut these out and separate so that students can draw one from each column.

|                                   |                 |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|
| A girl is alone in a dark room... | Western         |
| A man is talking to a stranger... | Science Fiction |
| A loud noise is heard...          | Horror          |
| Suddenly, a light flashes...      | Western         |
| A window breaks...                | Science Fiction |
| Two women sit side by side....    | Horror          |
| A man and a woman enjoy a meal... | Western         |
| A fist punches through a wall...  | Science Fiction |
| A vehicle skids to a stop...      | Horror          |
| A child screams...                | Western         |

|                          |                 |
|--------------------------|-----------------|
| The roof collapses...    | Science Fiction |
| A payment is received... | Horror          |



**Academic Standards**

Standard - CC.1.3.11-12.B Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences and conclusions based on and related to an author's implicit and explicit assumptions and beliefs.

Standard - CC.1.3.11-12.C Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama.

Standard - CC.1.3.11-12.F Evaluate how words and phrases shape meaning and tone in texts.

Standard - CC.1.3.11-12.G Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)

Standard - CC.1.3.11-12.I Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade-level reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies and tools.

Standard - CC.1.3.11-12.K Read and comprehend literary fiction on grade level, reading independently and proficiently.

Standard - CC.1.4.11-12.A Write informative/ explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately.

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