The (Unattainable) American Dream

Outside Reading Novels:
2013-2014
What is the “American Dream”? 

- National ethos/set of ideals of the United States 
  - Rooted in the Declaration of Independence: “all men are created equal” and that they are “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights” including “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” 
  - Freedom includes the opportunity for prosperity and success, and an upward social mobility achieved through hard work regardless of starting social class or any circumstances of birth
Historical Connotations

- “American Dream” has changed over time
  - Frontier Life, 1774: People settled, but moved farther west for a “better place”
  - Slowly transitioned to be more focused towards opportunity to achieve prosperity through hard work (includes the chance for one’s children to grow up and receive a good education and career without barriers, the right to make a choice without restriction according to their class, caste, religion, race, ethnicity)
19th Century

- Appealing to immigrants:
  - The New World offered freedoms from established governments.
  - Lack of a hierarchical or aristocratic society did not hinder individual aspirations.

- Gold Rush (aka: “instant success”) brought hundreds of thousands who looked for their fortunes overnight (only few achieved success this way).
20th Century

- Slowly became “The Dream” in which anyone could have a better, richer, and fuller life.
- Opportunities were endless if you worked for it (and were capable) – circumstances beyond your control (birth or social status no longer “predestined” people)
Social Commentary In Literature

- The American Dream is credited with helping to build a cohesive American experience.
- Many, however, satirized the “chase for the Dream”
  - Is it really possible for everyone?
  - Is it “truly” attainable?
  - Is it about opportunities or is it about materialism?
Literature Exploration: *Fences*

- Troy Maxon:
  - Struggles with providing for his family.
  - Due to the color barrier in the MLB, Troy was unable to make good money or save for a future (though, one could argue there is a discussion on if it was his age or his color that kept him from being a professional player).
  - Manages to cross a major cultural barrier – he *drives* the trash truck, he is not the *barrel lifter* – not a “great” life, he has borrowed money from Gabriel.
  - Has an affair that produces an illegitimate child (Raynell).
  - Refuses to let Cory play football… he does not want his son to experience racial discrimination.
  - Ends up losing mistress, the love of his wife (she stays married to him, but only to care for Raynell), kicks his son out and loses the respect of Cory.
  - Obsessed with the Grim Reaper and building a fence.
  - He is stubborn and loves his family, but has a poor way of demonstrating his love for them. He hurts them most often.
The Symbolism of the Fence

- At first, it is conceptualized as an allegory for Troy to keep the Grim Reaper away.

- Second Act, we realize that it is Rose’s request. She forced Troy to start building the fence as a means of securing what was hers. She wanted to keep and protect what belonged on the inside... but she also wanted to keep whatever should stay on “the other side” out.
The American Dream

- Draws on parallels with Reconstruction and civil rights
  - Men like Bono and Troy found their way in the world by stealing, being in jail, etc.
  - There is a linear link between the release of slaves to the disproportionate number of black men in jails WITH low-paying jobs WHICH encouraged a life of lawfulness
  - The characters act as a testimony to the fact that the U.S. failed blacks after Lincoln abolished slavery (with other additional government failures: Jim Crow laws, for example)
- The 1950s setting shows a time in which a new world of opportunity for blacks began to open up... which, in turn, led people like Troy to feel like a stranger in their own land. They grew up in the same place, but under very different means.
Next Novel: The Great Gatsby

- There will be days devoted in class to you reading TGG, however there will be the expectation that you read this at home (watch the agenda!)

- Similar to the movie, but there are some notable changes…

- The love story of Jay Gatsby’s American Dream: finding Daisy Buchanan (his first love) now that he has the money he needed to be “good enough” for her…

- Commentary to look for: 1920’s Jazz Age “under belly”, women as objects (Daisy is an item for Gatsby’s collection), and how words can be so beautiful… and so misleading.