

Great Gatsby Imagery Project

An interdisciplinary approach to understanding literature

Upper School English teacher, Alicia Evans and Visual Art teacher, Chris Fox collaborated in the development and presentation of a project for Ms. Evans' 11th grade class's study of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

Ms. Evans and Mr. Fox developed this project with the intent of helping students expand their understanding of the creative process that both writers and visual artists use in the development of their works. Reading published novels or seeing fully developed paintings in a museum does not always lead to an understanding of the process by which that work was created. This project was intended to provide that level of understanding of the many choices writers and artists make in the development of their ideas. More specifically, this project hoped to help students "see" more deeply into the descriptive writing of F. Scott Fitzgerald. By taking the imagery that occurs in a reader's mind and making it visible through the act of drawing and painting, students saw how language creates the opportunity for readers to conjure their own versions of the described scenes. With only three passages to work from, students could "see", through their drawings, how differently and personally each person interpreted the writing. The second part of the project asked students to work from a memory of a special place of their own and to attempt to "make it visible" through both images and writing, in hopes of providing further insight into the similarities and differences of "describing" through these different media as well as the creative process in general.

Process:

Students came to the art studio and were presented with the first part of this challenge. They were given handouts with three passages from *The Great Gatsby*.

Excerpt one:

"We walked through a high hallway into a bright rosy-colored space, fragilely bound into the house by French windows at either end. The windows were ajar and gleaming white against the fresh grass outside that seemed to grow a little way into the house. A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out the other like pale flags, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling, and then rippled over the wine-colored rug, making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea.

The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. They were both in white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house. I must have stood for a few moments listening to the whip and snap of the curtains and the groan of a picture on the wall. Then there was a boom as Tom Buchanan shut the rear windows and the caught wind died out about the room, and the curtains and the rugs and the two young women ballooned slowly to the floor."

Excerpt two:

"About half way between West Egg and New York the motor road hastily joins the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of a mile, so as to shrink away from a certain desolate area of land. This is a valley of ashes — a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of gray cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-gray men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight. But above the gray land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. The eyes

of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic — their irises are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a nonexistent nose. Evidently some wild wag of an oculist set them there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens, and then sank down himself into eternal blindness, or forgot them and moved away. But his eyes, dimmed a little by many paintless days, under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground.”

Excerpt three:

“It was nine o’clock — almost immediately afterward I looked at my watch and found it was ten. Mr. McKee was asleep on a chair with his fists clenched in his lap, like a photograph of a man of action. Taking out my handkerchief I wiped from his cheek the remains of the spot of dried lather that had worried me all the afternoon.

The little dog was sitting on the table looking with blind eyes through the smoke, and from time to time groaning faintly. People disappeared, reappeared, made plans to go somewhere, and then lost each other, searched for each other, found each other a few feet away. Some time toward midnight Tom Buchanan and Mrs. Wilson stood face to face discussing, in impassioned voices, whether Mrs. Wilson had any right to mention Daisy’s name.”

They were asked to read over the excerpts more than once and pay specific attention to the scenes that they visualized through Fitzgerald’s writing. They were asked to pick the scene that seemed to be the most visually powerful for them. Mr. Fox then showed some images of artists’ sketches and compositional studies and spoke about how artists develop ideas through exploring and composing with these initial image fragments. [Click here to see slide show images.](#) Students were then challenged to do the same as they tried to make visible the scenes that occurred to them from the Gatsby passages. Students spent two class periods engaged in this struggle moving between the written word, their own imagination and their attempt to represent their scenes through multiple small sketches of different versions of one or more scenes. Students were supplied with watercolor pencils as graphite pencils with which to develop their work. And some of this initial sketching involved an exploration of how these materials might work.



Student working on his sketches.

Once students had developed what they felt was a reasonably accurate version of their chosen scene they were given a piece of illustration board on which to develop a more “finished” version of their Gatsby scene. Several class periods were dedicated to the development of these small paintings and drawings. Teachers and students discussed how even these more developed works

could still be considered “first drafts” as often students realized that there were other choices they could have made to make their scene even more powerfully realized.



Mr. Fox helping with the transition from sketches to final version.

Once the visual image, based on the Gatsby passage, was complete or near complete, students were challenged with the second half of this project. With the lights off in the room, students were asked to close their eyes and imagine a place that was important to them. It could be a place they currently visited or a place from their past. They were prompted by teachers to “look around” in that scene, to “look to their right”, to “look to their left, to pay attention to some details that stood out, to pay attention to colors and textures, to “see” if there were sounds or smells that were present, to observe any light sources.



Ms. Evans listens to a student describing his personal place.

In short, students were led through the practice that both artists and writers use in working from their imagination. Students then repeated the practice of sketching and prototyping from their imagined scenes and then developing a more developed version. Repeating this process was intended to help students gain some deeper understanding of the creative process in literature and facility with this creative process.



Student developing his final version from his initial sketch.

Gallery of images:



