# The Ballad of the American Dream: Songs of *The Great Gatsby*

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**Introduction:**
In the throes of teaching F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* to a group of extremely reluctant sophomores, I realized I was doing it all wrong. Students were reading the text and it seemed like everyone was understanding the basics of what was happening in the plot, but they were struggling to understand the motivations behind and resulting effects of the characters' actions. Identifying and communicating a larger theme woven from the individual narrative threads of each character proved to be even more difficult. I was at an impasse.

I was in my second year of an arts integration fellowship at the time of my struggles with *Gatsby.* This program was provided through local arts-minded outlets such as a performing arts center and a museum of American art. As part of the fellowship I and other teachers were challenged to integrate arts education into our own English, social studies, or science curricula. One of our meetings had focused on integrating music and song-writing.

The following unit reflects my initial experience with integrating songwriting into the English classroom. Used to bolster the students' understanding of *The Great Gatsby*, its characters, and the central theme, this musical unit also taught students about traditional English and American songwriting and introduced many to a part of American culture they otherwise would not have known about. It was also a lot of fun!

I wrote about this experience for an article that appears in *The English Journal* that I co-wrote with fellow educator and music-lover, Dr. Chris Goering. The title of the article is "Beyond Enhancement: Teaching English through Musical Arts Integration."

## Objective:

After reading *The Great Gatsby* and learning about the ballad as an American narrative song tradition, students will be able to write a ballad about a character from *The Great Gatsby* that will relay the individual narrative of that character while also communicating a major theme from the novel: the gain and loss of the American Dream.

## Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.10.2
Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.10.3
Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.10.5
Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.10.10
By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 9-10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3
Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.C
Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D
Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.10
Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

## Methodology and Sequence:

This unit requires at least four (4) 45-50-minute class periods, or three (3) ~90-minute blocked class periods. It is necessary to build in time for students to not only re-trace the narrative of a *Gatsby* character in their groups, but also to craft their songs. Time for revision and performance practice is also necessary. It is up to the individual instructor to determine how much in-class time they want to provide their students, though I think supervised practice ultimately results in a greater product.

**Summary:**

1. **Introduction - Building the Ballad Foundation**
   Students will learn about traditional ballads and be able to identify the structure, narrative plot, and tone of a ballad.

2. **Application and Exploration**
   In assigned groups, students will demonstrate their understanding of the motivations and narrative trajectory of a single character in *The Great Gatsby*, as well as how that character's story contributes to a theme of the novel as a whole. Groups will begin the ballad-writing process.

3. **Composition and Revision**
   Students will begin putting the music to their words. In assigned groups, students will work and play together to craft the musical accompaniment to their ballad, while also collaborating to revise their lyrics.

4. **Performance and Publication**
   Groups will perform and/or record their fully composed ballads for their classmates. The end result will be a compilation of ballads written about the characters of *The Great Gatsby*; truly a whole-class collaborative effort to create a singular product that demonstrates not only their understanding of the literature, but also their ability to apply it in a new, challenging, and culturally enriching way: music!

## 1: Introduction - Building the Ballad Foundation

> **Prerequisite:** Students will have already finished reading F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.
> **Objective:** Students will become familiar with the history, structure, and purpose of the ballad song-form. Students will be able to read to understand an unfamiliar concept. Students will be able to analyze a ballad for plot, structure, and tone.

Provide students with articles (**Resource A**) to help them understand the ballad song-form. Reading the articles provides an opportunity to practice close-reading strategies for understanding of an unfamiliar topic. After a brief discussion of what they've read, have students take notes on ballads. The most important takeaways are:

1. Ballads portray a narrative, and they often end in tragedy.
2. Ballads have a consistent structure and rhyme scheme throughout.
3. Ballads, though not uniquely American, were appropriated into the American folk tradition and therefore are a perfect fit for a great piece of American literature that ends in tragedy. "Barbara Allen" is a perfect example of this appropriation, as it is one of the oldest.

To keep things simple, I tell my students that ballads are most commonly structured of quatrains that follow a consistent rhyme scheme throughout the song.

Provide students with lyrics from a popular ballad (I used Joan Baez's recording of "Barbara Allen" - **Resource B**) and play the audio. Ask the students to work in pairs or groups of three and four to determine the rhyme scheme, analyze the plot, and identify the tone of both the lyrics and the performance. Discuss with students, and check for understanding.

## 2: Application and Exploration

**Prerequisite:** Students will have already finished reading F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.
Students will have an understanding of the history and traditional composition of the ballad song-form.

**Objectives:** Students will use their understanding of the ballad song-form to begin crafting their own ballads about characters from *The Great Gatsby*. Students will be able to draft a ballad, starting with lyrics that follow common ballad structure.

Begin class by playing a couple more popular ballads. YouTube is a tremendous resource here, and there are plenty of songs from the likes of Johnny Cash and Bob Dylan to choose from. If time allows or some students require enrichment, you may to choose to delve further into the evolution of the ballad song-form, as it was further appropriated into pop and hip-hop traditions.

Next, arrange students in groups of three or four. For this activity, I create groups of diverse abilities/performance history. It will also be beneficial to try to put at least one student with a music background in each group, as someone will need to take the lead when they start crafting a song.

Assign each group a character: Jay Gatsby, Nick Carraway, Daisy Buchanan, Tom Buchanan, Myrtle Wilson, or George Wilson. Explain that each group will be writing a ballad about their assigned character.

Before students begin drafting their ballads, put the following "Somebody wanted…, but…, so…." sentence frame on the board, projector screen, or overhead:

**Somebody wanted…, but…. So….**

**_____ wanted _____ , but**

**(Character) (What was their initial motivation)**

**_____. So _____.**

**(What conflict did they face?) (What happened to resolve that conflict?)**

In their groups, students will begin their understanding of their assigned character with this simple two-sentence statement. This will serve as their initial brainstorming for their song. By discussing and creating this “Somebody wanted...but...so” statement, students will have a better understanding of their character’s motivation and the conflict they faced, which resulted in that character’s individual narrative within the larger whole of the novel.

As students work on their statement, check in with each group to make sure they have a clear understanding of their character.

Once a group has completed their character statement, give the students the assignment sheet **(Resource C)**. With each group or the whole class, instruct the students in what they are to do and go over the scoring process with them:

*“You will work in your groups to write, compose, and perform a ballad about your assigned character from* The Great Gatsby*. Remember that a ballad is a narrative song, often focused on a single character’s life that ends in tragedy. I’m not sure what would be better candidates for ballads than these tragic characters.*

*Using what you’ve learned about the traditional structure and tone of tragic ballads, as well as your existing knowledge of* The Great Gatsby*, create a ballad about your assigned character. Be sure to follow the scoring guide and instructions on the assignment sheet. Once your group has drafted its lyrics, you can begin composing the music to your song. The music can be digitally composed using various apps or through the instruments that some of you already play.*

*Remember, you will be performing this piece!*

Allow the groups the rest of the class period to draft their lyrics. Be sure to monitor the groups and encourage a collaboration and participation from each group member. Intervene when necessary.

Tell students to bring their music-making tools to the next class, whether that’s their instruments or their iPhones.

## 3: Composition and Revision

> **Objective:** Students will craft their song by adding music. In the process, they will revise their written lyrics.

Before this class it would be a good idea to work on your own music-making chops. Incredibly, you don't have to be a musician to be a musician! There are plenty of apps out there to aid in the music composition process. I used and recommend GarageBand to compose some music, using their smart-guitar feature and looping tools to create a musical backdrop . While hopefully many students will bring guitars and other instruments to accompany their lyrics, you should familiarize yourself with whatever digital music resources you can to aid those groups that might need them.

Begin the lesson with some inspiration by playing one or two more ballads, such as Johnny Cash's "John Henry" or Bob Dylan's "Hurricane." Warren G's "Regulators" (ft. Nate Dogg) is a good example of a hip-hop ballad, though you might want to listen first before playing for your students. Let the students hear and process the cadence of the music and the lyrics that go with them.

Then, hand it over. Let the students play with their instruments, whether it's their guitars, tubas, or iphones. This is going to get noisy and messy, but remember, this is part of the writing process. Though it might be a good idea to see if you can meet in the gym or another more remote classroom for this part.

I recommend giving your class at least one entire class period to compose their music and revise their lyrics to fit. You may want to give them more depending on how polished you want their final product and performance to be.

## 4: Performance and Publication

> **Objective:** Students will show what they've learned and show off what they've created by performing their song for the class.

Dedicate a day for the groups to perform. This is where you get to be creative, too. Transform your classroom into a venue with cool lighting and maybe a couple of prop microphones. Some of your students may surprise you!

Record the student performances. I record video, but you could also just use the Voice Memo app on a smartphone to record the audio. It's a rough recording, but it's fun to play back for them.

If your students are too shy, or you can't dedicate a day to performance, set up a recording booth in your school's book closet (or just find a quiet corner) and have your students record their songs. This can be as simple or complex as you make it.

Gather the recordings of each group's ballad - whether it was their live performance or their own booth-recorded song - and create a playlist you can share with the class. Now not only has each group collaborated with their peers to write a song that shows their understandings of the characters and themes of *The Great Gatsby,* but the entire class has collaborated to create an entire album of *Gatsby* ballads!

**Resources  Appendix:**

- **A. Articles**
- **B. Example Lyrics**
- **C. Assignment Handout**

**Resource A: Articles About Ballads**

The following three articles were utilized as front-loading resources for students. I asked students to close-read and annotate the articles to come up with a definition and explanation of ballads in the American tradition.

**The Library of Congress Celebrates the Songs of America: Traditional Ballads.**

https://www.loc.gov/collections/songs-of-america/articles-and-essays/musical-styles/traditional-and-ethnic/traditional-ballads/

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# Poetic Form: Ballad

Centuries-old in practice, the composition of ballads began in the European folk tradition, in many cases accompanied by musical instruments. Ballads were not originally transcribed, but rather preserved orally for generations, passed along through recitation. Their subject matter dealt with religious themes, love, tragedy, domestic crimes, and sometimes even political propaganda.

A typical ballad is a plot-driven song, with one or more characters hurriedly unfurling events leading to a dramatic conclusion. At best, a ballad does not tell the reader what's happening, but rather shows the reader what's happening, describing each crucial moment in the trail of events. To convey that sense of emotional urgency, the ballad is often constructed in quatrain stanzas, each line containing as few as three or four stresses and rhyming either the second and fourth lines, or all alternating lines.

Ballads began to make their way into print in fifteenth-century England. During the Renaissance, making and selling ballad broadsides became a popular practice, though these songs rarely earned the respect of artists because their authors, called "pot poets," often dwelled among the lower classes.

However, the form evolved into a writer's sport. Nineteenth-century poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth wrote numerous ballads. Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the tale of a cursed sailor aboard a storm-tossed ship, is one of the English language's most revered ballads. It begins:

It is an ancient mariner
And he stoppeth one of three.
—"By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,
Now wherefore stoppest thou me?

The bridegroom's doors are opened wide,
And I am next of kin;
The guests are met, the feast is set:
Mayst hear the merry din."

He holds him with his skinny hand,
"There was a ship," quoth he.
"Hold off! unhand me, grey-beard loon!"
Eftsoons his hand dropped he.

He holds him with his glittering eye—
The wedding-guest stood still,
And listens like a three-years' child:

The mariner hath his will.

Other balladeers, including Thomas Percy and, later, W. B. Yeats, contributed to the English tradition. In America, the ballad evolved into folk songs such as "Casey Jones," the cowboy favorite "Streets of Laredo," and "John Henry."

read poems in the ballad form

NPR.ORG

# Hundreds Of Years Old, These Songs Tour Like New

APRIL 20, 2013 6:17 AM ET

STEPHANIE COLEMAN

text and accompanying music here:
http://www.npr.org/2013/04/20/177997065/not-for-kids-these-child-ballads-are-steeped-in-history

transcript of radio feature:
http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=177997065

Some stories stand the test of time: Shakespeare's plays, the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, and the Child ballads.

If you're unfamiliar with them, they're not for children. They're Scottish and English folk songs from the 17th and 18th centuries and earlier. They're named after Francis James Child, the Harvard professor and folklorist who collected them.

Through the centuries, the Child ballads have been passed down and tweaked to fit the times. More recently, they've been adapted by the folk revivalists of the 1950s, folk rockers of the '60s and '70s, and now picked up by a duo of young songwriters.

One example of a modernized Child ballad is Simon and Garfunkel's "Scarborough Fair." It's a traditional song from the 1670s, a variant of a Child ballad called "The Elfin Knight." They learned it from English folk singer Martin Carthy.

"The thing that excited me was the way so many of these songs spoke loud and clear over the centuries," Carthy says. "They make perfect sense nowadays."

Carthy first learned about the Child ballads more than 50 years ago and went on to record dozens of them.

"I became really interested and then fascinated and then completely embroiled, completely enslaved by them," he says, "and I absolutely love them to this day."

**Child's Work Let Others Play**

About 100 years earlier, Francis James Child fell in love with them, too. He was among the first to consider them an important part of early English literature — right alongside the works of Geoffrey Chaucer or Edmund Spenser.

"I think he was attracted to the poetry, to the language that he was reading," says Mary Ellen Brown, a professor at Indiana University and an expert on Child. "He saw it as something quite beautiful from an aesthetic point of view."

Child published the songs he collected in a 10-volume opus called *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. It contains the lyrics to 305 songs, along with a list of alternate versions for each and lengthy notes.

"What he wanted to do was create a critical edition of these texts that could be studied by scholars, and it was for scholars, initially," Brown says.

But in time, the books reached a wider audience and became a giant sourcebook for singers and musicians, she says.

"I don't think he could have imagined it. That was not what he set out to do," she says.

**Revived As Folk Songs, Sung By Rock Stars**

Folk singers like Pete Seeger and Joan Baez dusted the ballads off in the 1950s; rockers like Fairport Convention electrified them in the '60s, and contemporary bands like the Fleet Foxes and the Decemberists have carried them into the 21st century. Now, they've fallen into the hands of two songwriters from New York City.

Anais Mitchell and Jefferson Hamer are 30-something songwriters who just released an album of seven Child ballads. They reworked many of the songs, using the multiple versions of lyrics from the books as raw material. They felt free to create their own melodies because Francis James Child specified only words, not music.

"That's a much different process than when you're given a single version of a song, maybe it's a source recording [or] some old version," Hamer says. "But you have this one text which you have to treat like the holy grail, but with the Child ballads you have choices."

They substituted phrases, cut verses and even made new ones up.

For us, we were able to kind of pick and choose between these different versions," Mitchell says.

**Old Language, New Songs**

The young songwriters' choices were guided by their desire to make the stories clear to modern American audiences. So they updated archaic phrases like "tirled at the pin," which means knocking at the door, to something more familiar.

"Especially for our American listeners, we didn't want to throw up a roadblock for them so that then they're like, 'What's that mean?' And they miss the whole stanza," she says.

The most dramatic revision they made was to "Tam Lin," an epic ballad that clocks in at nearly seven minutes and has 27 verses. It's the story of a young maiden who gets pregnant by a woodland shape-shifter named Tam Lin. As he morphs from one fearsome creature to the next, his lover has to hold on to him until he finally becomes human.

Hamer and Mitchell decided to axe the back story about a fairy queen who kidnaps and curses Tam Lin.

"If you take that away, you perhaps increase the sort of surreal psychological subtext," Hamer says. "Maybe you even strengthen the metaphor for endurance of love through adversity."

"I'm sure both of us have felt the kind of trepidation that anyone rolling up their sleeves with this material feels," Mitchell says. "Like, are we going to mess it up in some way?"

Carthy says these songs are immensely changeable, however, and that they will change.

"I could not have imagined in 1961 ... what people would be doing with these songs now we're in 2013," he says. "But the big thrill is that it still works. It still works. It still excites people.

It certainly excited Mitchell and Hamer enough to record an album's worth of ballads and take them on tour. They're playing them for new audiences with the hope that the next generation will play around with them, too.

**Resource B: Example Song and Lyrics of a traditional ballad.**
I played this song for my students and asked students to follow along in the lyrics. Then students analyzed the song for structure, plot, tone, and theme.

## **Barbara Allen** as performed by Joan Baez,

Twas in the merry month of May
When green buds all were swelling,
Sweet William on his death bed lay
For love of Barbara Allen.

He sent his servant to the town
To the place where she was dwelling,
Saying you must come, to my master dear
If your name be Barbara Allen.

So slowly, slowly she got up
And slowly she drew nigh him,
And the only words to him did say
Young man I think you're dying.

He turned his face unto the wall
And death was in him welling,
Good-bye, good-bye, to my friends all
Be good to Barbara Allen.

When he was dead and laid in grave
She heard the death bells knelling
And every stroke to her did say
Hard hearted Barbara Allen.

Oh mother, oh mother go dig my grave
Make it both long and narrow,
Sweet William died of love for me
And I will die of sorrow.

And father, oh father, go dig my grave
Make it both long and narrow,
Sweet William died on yesterday
And I will die tomorrow.

Barbara Allen was buried in the old churchyard
Sweet William was buried beside her,
Out of sweet William's heart, there grew a rose
Out of Barbara Allen's a briar.

They grew and grew in the old churchyard
Till they could grow no higher
At the end they formed, a true lover's knot
And the rose grew round the briar

**Resource C - Assignment Sheet:**

On the next page, please find a copy of the front and back assignment sheet I gave each student. This includes instructions for the assignment as well as reflection questions for each individual student to answer.

**The Ballad of the American Dream: Songs of *The Great Gatsby***

**Objective:**
After reading *The Great Gatsby* and learning about the ballad as an American narrative song tradition, students will be able to write a ballad about a character from *The Great Gatsby* that will relay the individual narrative of that character while also communicating a major theme from the novel: the gain and loss of the American Dream.

**Your group's ballad should:**

- Be made up of at least five stanzas. ___ / 20 pts
- Follow a consistent structure and rhyme scheme. ___ / 20 pts
- Tell the story of your character. ___ / 20 pts
- Communicate a theme of the novel. ___ / 20 pts
- Be written and performed with music. ___ / 20 pts

Total: ____ / 100 pts

In addition to your group score, each individual will be graded for their participation. This grade will come from information gathered through teacher observation, group performance, and peer responses.

Individual Participation: ____ / 50 pts

**Please respond to the questions on the back of this page. These questions should be answered individually. Please be thorough and thoughtful in your responses.**

**1.** a) Character your group's ballad is about:

b) How many stanzas and what type:
c) Rhyme scheme:

2. Describe the writing process your group went through in crafting your ballad:

3. How did your group approach the musical component of your ballad? Who took the lead on this (can be an individual or multiple people)?

4. What theme from the novel does your ballad communicate? How?

5. Who in your group took the lead? Who participated? Who should have contributed more? Please explain.