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Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's Minnesota childhood and New York adventures inspire events in Nick's and Gatsby's lives. As a child, Fitzgerald liked to imagine he was from British royalty and had been abandoned on his parents' doorstep. A weak student, Fitzgerald was sent to boarding school. His parents hoped that this education would improve his prospects. Like the characters in the novel, Fitzgerald took a train from his Midwest home in St. Paul, Minnesota, to New York City. Many of his short stories explore the effects that a physical departure from the Midwest could have on a person.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Students should take notes as they listen. Ask students to discuss what they learned about F. Scott Fitzgerald from the Audio Guide.

Distribute Reader's Guide essays, "F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1896–1940," "Fitzgerald and the Jazz Age," and "Fitzgerald and His Other Works." Divide the class into groups. Assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group will present what it learned from the essay. Ask students to add a creative twist to make their presentations memorable.

Writing Exercise

The novel begins with a quote from Thomas Parke D'Invilliers, a character from Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*: "Then wear the gold hat, if that will move her; / If you can bounce high, bounce for her too, / Till she cry 'Lover, gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover, / I must have you!'" What does this poem mean? Ask students to examine the intention behind this epigraph. Based on what they learned from the Audio Guide, why do they think Fitzgerald chose this quote?

Homework

Read Chapter 1. Prepare your students to read roughly 20 pages per night in order to complete this book in ten lessons. As they read, students should consider these questions: Why is Nick telling this story? Why is Nick "confused and a little disgusted" at the end of the chapter?

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Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

The Great Gatsby is set in the mid-1920s, a prosperous time at home and abroad. The United States had joined World War I in 1917, three years after its eruption. The 1919 Peace of Paris established accord between nations that ended the war. Many considered American intervention the best way to a decisive and quick Allied victory.

Prohibition at home led to a growing world of organized crime, as the sale of alcohol went underground. Even the 1919 World Series was affected, as members of the White Sox (the team favored to win) decided to “throw” the series, creating larger profits for those gambling against the Sox. In Harlem, the northern migration of African Americans created an artistic expansion of literature, music, plays, political tracts, and visual art. And around the country, technology produced new opportunities for Americans, including radio, motion pictures, automobiles, and electric appliances.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Maureen Corrigan explains that in this novel, “you can’t get at the truth.” Ask students the following questions: From what you heard on the Audio Guide, what do you think Corrigan means? Is there any indication, in the first twenty-one pages, that we will not “get at the truth”?

Find samples of legendary jazz recordings. Play King Oliver’s “Chimes Blues,” which includes Louis Armstrong’s first recorded solo. Move on to Armstrong’s “Sugar Foot Stomp” and “West End Blues.” How does Armstrong’s music change from 1923 to 1928? Before you answer, listen to each piece again. How does this music capture the spirit of the 1920s?

Writing Exercise

Have students read Handout One: Prohibition and Handout Three: Harlem in the Jazz Age. After reading these handouts and listening to The Big Read Audio Guide and/or Louis Armstrong’s music, students should write a one-page summary of the arts and culture of the era. In the first twenty-one pages of the novel, is Fitzgerald’s depiction consistent with what they have learned? Why or why not?

Homework

Have students read Chapter 2. What does Nick learn about Tom at the end of Chapter 2? How does Tom’s treatment of Mrs. Wilson affect Nick?

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Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters’ thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

The Great Gatsby is told in the first person by Nick Carraway. The novel begins from the point of view of an older Nick, reminiscing on the events of one summer. Nick’s perspective, entangled in the dramatic action, subjectively depicts a series of events.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to list the things they’ve learned about Nick Carraway in the first two chapters of the novel. How might his background color the way he tells this story? How trustworthy is Nick?

How might the perspective of Chapter 1 change if F. Scott Fitzgerald had chosen to narrate the story in the first person from Daisy’s “sophisticated” point of view? Have the class brainstorm the outline of this new chapter.

Writing Exercise

Based on the previous activity, write a few pages of Daisy’s version of the story.

Chapter 2 begins with the “valley of ashes” and the “eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg.” What do they reveal about Nick’s character and point of view? What do they reveal about the landscape?

Homework

Read Chapter 3. What do we learn about Gatsby from Nick’s observations before we meet him?

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Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

Nick Carraway narrates the story, but it is Jay Gatsby who is the novel's protagonist. Gatsby's love affair with Daisy, her marriage to Tom, and Gatsby's quest to regain Daisy's affection provide the story's narrative arc.

Discussion Activities

Ask your students the following questions: What kind of person is Nick Carraway? How does he compare to narrators in other novels your students have studied? How might Nick's narration color the way readers view the other characters? Is he a reliable narrator?

Divide the class into groups. Assign each group two secondary characters: Daisy, Jordan, Tom, Myrtle, Wilson, Mrs. McKee, Catherine, Mr. McKee, or Gatsby's party-goers. Ask students to review the first three chapters of the novel. Have each group list key attributes of its characters. Prepare a presentation that documents moments when these characters bring out reactions from Nick. What do these characters teach Nick about himself? What do we learn about Gatsby?

Writing Exercise

Have students write two pages on the character they believe to be an antagonist to Nick, to Gatsby, or to both men. What qualities does this character have that make him or her an opposing force? How might encounters with the antagonist change Nick or Gatsby?

Homework

Homework: Chapter 4. Ask students to consider Fitzgerald's descriptions as they read. Find the three most vivid descriptions in Chapter 4. Are they effective? Why or why not? Why does Nick say, "There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy, and the tired?"

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Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers use figurative language such as imagery, similes, and metaphors to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions in a story. Imagery—a word or phrase that refers to sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste)—helps create a physical experience for the reader and adds immediacy to literary language.

Some figurative language asks us to stretch our imaginations, finding the likeness in seemingly unrelated things. Simile is a comparison of two things that initially seem quite different but are shown to have significant resemblance. Similes employ connective words, usually “like,” “as,” “than,” or a verb such as “resembles.” A metaphor is a statement that one thing is something else that, in a literal sense, it is not. By asserting that a thing is something else, a metaphor creates a close association that underscores an important similarity between these two things.

Discussion Activities

Divide the class into groups. Assign each group a chapter (1–4) and ask them to identify figurative language used in that chapter. They should specifically identify images, similes, and metaphors. In those chapters, how does the figurative language assist in telling the story? Have groups present their findings to the class.

Writing Exercise

Have students pick literary terms out of a hat and write a sentence that reflects the literary technique. Have each student read aloud the sentence he or she wrote. The rest of the class must identify what technique the student was attempting to master.

Have students write a few paragraphs telling a story about an important childhood event. In their stories, students should use imagery, simile, and metaphor at least twice. Can they see how developing figurative language in a story contributes to the artistry of the novel?

Homework

Read Chapter 5. Students should find examples of one (or two) of the literary techniques discussed in class. They should be ready to present them to begin the next discussion.

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Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and reinterpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

Discussion Activities

Discuss the valley of ashes in Chapter 2. Keeping in mind the historical and cultural contexts of the novel, what might the valley symbolize? Why might Fitzgerald want to underscore an important theme, such as the pursuit of wealth, so early in the story? What do we learn about Nick from his description?

Discuss some of the other potent symbols in the story. How are these interpretive keys to the novel's meaning? How might the "two young women . . . buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon" symbolize the women of this generation?

Gatsby looks for Daisy in the green light at the end of her dock. Does anyone in the story truly know Daisy? Does the light become a symbol for something else?

Writing Exercise

Nick describes that Gatsby had created an illusion of "colossal vitality." Write three paragraphs from Nick's point of view considering what Daisy has come to represent. Why has Gatsby created such a "colossal" illusion? How does Nick feel about the elevation of Daisy to almost epic status?

Homework

Read Chapter 6. At the end of Chapter 5, Nick says, "It was the hour of a profound human change, and excitement was generating on the air." What happens in Chapter 6 to fulfill Nick's prediction?

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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald explores characters in relation to their landscape, their wealth, and their prior relationships. The more we know about these characters, the more their lives shift from idyllic islands of wealth to colorless portraits floating through a “valley of ashes” with “grotesque gardens.” In this lesson, examine Fitzgerald's ability to present characters in both their ideal and real countenances.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to consider whether any of the main characters have changed in the novel's first six chapters. Examine Tom, Daisy, Nick, Jordan, and Gatsby. Are there any moments when these characters have a realization about their circumstances or change a firmly held opinion?

In the beginning of the novel, Daisy says contemptuously “Sophisticated—God, I'm sophisticated!” Now that we know more about Daisy, what did she mean? Does her life represent the free spirit of the Roaring Twenties? If not, why not?

How does the way Fitzgerald describes the Long Island landscape parallel the internal struggles of the main characters?

Writing Exercise

Have students read Handout Two: *Gatsby's Guide to Manhood* and write a brief essay on whether or not this is a coming-of-age story. Which characters are growing in maturity and insight if this is a coming-of-age story? Students should support their conclusions with quotes from the novel.

Homework

Read Chapter 7. Come to class with the two most important turning points in the plot of the novel.

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Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story's conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the effects of that climactic action are presented.

The Great Gatsby has a remarkable structure. Chapter 5 provides the emotional center of the drama: when Gatsby reunites with Daisy, when Nick experiences a grand foreboding, and when Daisy's voice becomes a "deathless song." Some chapters exhibit parallels. Chapters 2 and 8 are physically violent turning points, with grotesque landscapes, dust, and ashes. The novel begins with Nick's arrival to Long Island and his memories of his father's words. Nick wants "the world to be ... at a sort of moral attention forever." The novel ends with an encounter with Gatsby's father and Nick's realization: "I see now that this has been a story of the West after all ... [P]erhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life."

Discussion Activities

Have students identify the most important turning points in the novel. Ask them to identify the passages from the novel, explaining why these events are the most significant. Use this information for the next activity.

Map a timeline that depicts the dramatic build-up in the novel. This map should include the most significant turning points but also examine the lesser events that build tension. As students develop their maps, they should define the beginning, middle, and end of the plot.

Writing Exercise

Outline a sequel to Fitzgerald's novel. How would this plot unfold? How might students map the beginning, middle, and end? Have them write the opening paragraphs to the sequel.

Rewrite the novel's ending as if Gatsby and Daisy reunite. Would the novel be as powerful? Why or why not? What might make this new plot successful?

Homework

Read Chapters 8 and 9. Why does Nick think that Gatsby "paid a high price for living too long with a single dream"?

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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Discuss as a class several of the major themes of the novel using the topics below and those that the students identify. Ask students to write a two-page essay on what they consider to be the book's most important theme exploring the reasons the topic would have resonated with readers when the book was first published. Is the topic still relevant today? If so, why? If not, why not?

Alienation

At one party, Nick observes, "People disappeared, reappeared, made plans to go somewhere, and then lost each other, searched for each other, found each other a few feet away." Soon afterward, Tom breaks his lover's nose. Does Fitzgerald use parties to highlight his characters' failures to relate to one another? Do Gatsby's parties reflect genuine celebration or a kind of mourning?

Friendship

Nick is the only person, aside from Gatsby's father, who attends the funeral. What kind of friendship do Nick and Gatsby have? What does Nick derive from this friendship? Is it true friendship, or does Nick simply pity Gatsby his "romantic readiness"?

Identity

In Chapter 7, we learn of Gatsby's origins as James Gatz of North Dakota. In the novel, Gatsby has become his alter ego, leaving James Gatz behind as he travels the world as Dan Cody's steward. Was Gatsby doomed to tragedy as long as he disguised his Midwestern origins in favor of a more extravagant, fictional biography? Is Nick judging Gatsby for these imaginative exploits or admiring this skill?

The American Dream

In an era of new technology, new opportunity, and artistic expansion, does Fitzgerald's novel comment on American morality and idealism? Is *The Great Gatsby* a satire or critique of American life? If not, why not?



Homework

Begin essays, using the Essay Topics. Outlines are due at the next class.

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Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Put these on the board. What elevates a novel to greatness? Then ask them to discuss, within groups, other books that include some of the same characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *The Great Gatsby*? Is this a great novel?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Fitzgerald provide through Nick and Gatsby? What does this voice tell us about the concerns and dreams of their generation?

According to avant-garde writer Gertrude Stein, this was the novel of the Lost Generation. How might it represent the hopes and dreams of Americans during the 1920s?

If you were the voice of your generation, what would be your most important message? Why might you choose to convey this in a novel rather than a speech or an essay? What story would you tell to get your point across?

Writing Exercise

Have students work on their essays in class. Be available to assist with outlines, drafts, and arguments. Have them partner with another student to edit outlines and rough drafts. For this editing, provide students with a list of things they should look for in a well-written essay.

Homework

Students should finish writing their essays to hand in during the next class period.

Prohibition

In Fitzgerald’s novel, Jay Gatsby is a mythic figure in the Long Island landscape. All-night parties at his mansion include servants, famous guests, live music, and enough alcohol to make each event unpredictable. While Gatsby’s occupation is a mystery, some speculate that he must have questionable associations in order to obtain such generous amounts of wealth and liquor.

In January 1920, Congress enacted the 18th Amendment to the Constitution in order to control the abuse of alcohol and limit political benefits that emerged from the liquor business. This amendment stated that it was no longer legal to sell, manufacture, or transport alcohol for the purpose of consumption. While owning and drinking alcohol was legal, one could not import alcohol from another country, nor could one transport alcohol anywhere within the United States. Prohibition was intended to increase the general health of Americans while decreasing alcoholism, corruption, and crime.

While organized crime existed prior to the 18th Amendment, Prohibition enabled Al “Scarface” Capone to expand his Chicago crime syndicate to include “bootlegging,” the illegal trafficking of alcohol. In 1925, Capone may have been the most powerful mob boss in the nation. Prohibition only amplified crime in cities such as Chicago, where mob bosses like Capone freely murdered those who got in their way.

The spirit of Prohibition had been building in the United States for years. McGuffey Readers, the most widely used schoolbook between 1830 and 1960, advocated temperance. This included rhyming poems that decried liquor stores as sources of robbery, murder, and harming one’s neighbors. In 1879, the Department of Scientific Temperance Instruction guided every state including the District of Columbia to require “anti-alcohol education.” The leader of this movement, Mary Hunt, was later criticized for distorting scientific facts to support her platform. Nonetheless, many believe that Hunt established the support necessary to ratify the 18th Amendment.

In 1933, the 21st Amendment to the Constitution repealed the Prohibition Act. Prohibition no longer provided a solution to personal indulgence, political corruption, or organized crime. Some Americans questioned whether Prohibition restricted individual liberty by enforcing specific moral values. The dire conditions of the Great Depression, however, argued in favor of legalizing alcohol to collect revenues from liquor sales. Not only did legal sales boost the economy and undermine the mobs, millions of government dollars spent on law enforcement could be otherwise invested.



Gatsby's Guide to Manhood

Near the end of *The Great Gatsby* Nick reveals that the young, idealistic, and disciplined Jay Gatsby wrote some “General Resolves” inside his copy of Clarence Mulford’s 1910 novel *Hopalong Cassidy*. The second in what would be a series of novels, Bill “Hopalong” Cassidy provided an adventurous role model to young boys. In the 1930s, these novels would be made into popular films. It is not surprising therefore, that the young Gatsby would have been fascinated with this heroic cowboy.

Fitzgerald continues to reference western heroes by naming Gatsby’s benefactor “Dan Cody,” an allusion to Daniel Boone and Buffalo Bill Cody. In the late eighteenth century, Daniel Boone, an American pioneer, created routes for westward expansion to what is now Kentucky and Missouri. Narratives of these exploits were published in magazines, inspiring young people with accounts of courage. Buffalo Bill Cody began his career with a series of Wild–West experiences, working for Custer, shooting buffalo, and acting as a scout for the U.S. Army. In 1872, Cody received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his service. Later, a penchant for showmanship led to “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West,” a theatrical version of western adventures. This show would run for thirty years. When Cody died in 1917, his fortune was plundered by mismanagement, but his reputation remained intact.

The young Gatsby created rules for his behavior as well as a regimented schedule. This routine included exercising, studying electricity, working, playing sports, practicing “elocution and poise,”

and concluding each day with a two-hour study of inventions. In the 1920s, the practice of creating a routine and following certain “resolves” was encouraged by the YMCA, the United States Public Health Service, and other organizations intent on shaping young people into model citizens. The United States Public Health Service released a series of posters to assist young boys and girls in developing a healthy lifestyle. While these posters advocated a daily regimen of exercise, they also instructed young people on eating habits, sexual practices, and moral behavior. For example, one poster provides a sample reading list to properly guide the young male mind. Similar posters assisted young girls in how to keep a good home, stay fit, and build a family.

The Great Gatsby’s cast includes only adult characters that would have been raised in an environment filled with guidelines for proper behavior and cowboy legends. Perhaps Gatsby himself never matures, endlessly enchanted by his dreams, relentless in his attempts—guided by “general resolves”—to become the mythic American figure like Daniel Boone, Buffalo Bill, or, in the novel, Dan Cody. This may be only one way that the novel becomes a satire, critiquing the implausible dreams and childish whims embraced by the Roaring Twenties generation in America.



Harlem in the Jazz Age

While the characters in *The Great Gatsby* moved to New York from the Midwest, thousands of African Americans simultaneously migrated north. According to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, in the decade between 1910 and 1920, New York's black population increased by 66 percent, Chicago's by 148 percent, and Philadelphia's by 500 percent. Detroit experienced an amazing growth rate of 611 percent. This influx heightened black intellectual output in cities like New York and Chicago. While new industry (like Henry Ford's automotive factories) supplied jobs to these new arrivals, artists within these communities gave voice to the new challenges of the African American experience. Ralph Ellison captures this journey in his 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*. In this story, the main character migrates from his boyhood South to New York City. An educated young man's dreams transform as urban life brings betrayal and racial strife.

Harlem, a neighborhood in New York City, became the center for African American artists from 1910 to 1930. These artists produced an astounding array of internationally acclaimed works. Harlem Renaissance literary greats included poet Langston Hughes, author Zora Neale Hurston, writer Richard Wright, and political thinker W.E.B. DuBois. At the same time, a host of musicians would make an indelible mark on the evolution of American music. These artists included Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Benny Goodman, and

Bessie Smith. Since racial prejudice dominated mainstream America, some artists, like actress and dancer Josephine Baker, met with more success in Europe. International audiences also provided artists with an opportunity to experiment more freely with their art forms.

While American society was still segregated, artistic collaborations between blacks and whites would provide a foundation for improving interracial relations. Zora Neale Hurston, a trained anthropologist as well as novelist, called whites supporting this artistic movement Negrotarian. Jazz musicians from New Orleans to New York to California overcame racial differences to embrace potent musical collaborations. Literary works, plays, paintings, and political commentary provided all Americans with new, positive, and realistically complex images of the African American. As a result, there was great debate within African American communities as to what would properly represent the race. W.E.B. DuBois rejected Bessie Smith's music as inappropriate. Richard Wright and Alain Locke criticized Hurston's use of language as failing the African American by representing her or him as uneducated. The gusto and triumph of the Harlem Renaissance was fed precisely by tensions that forced artists to come to terms with new definitions of race made possible in and through a variety of art forms.

