Stories and Curriculum for Teaching Young Adults About Living Without Control

R Y A N. M A D I S O N

There is always a divide between one generation and the next. Adults appear to have all of the control and young adults are just starting to understand how little control they have over their own lives. This is often what creates the famous “rebellious stage,” as the frustration builds until it finds an outlet, whatever that may be. Literature is unique in the way it allows anyone to see another person’s perspective, to experience a world different from his/her own. But most importantly, literature allows its readers to encounter relevant themes and think about them in different ways. In the end, literature can help young adults come to terms with a world that no one really has control of, teaching them that they can make their own decisions and that there is rarely a “right” answer.

It is therefore the job of the educator to find the specific literature that will best allow his/her students to confront their own lives. It is then the responsibility of the teacher to guide his/her students into exploring and understanding themselves through that piece of literature. Of course, the first question is what genre does a teacher introduce students to. Imagination finds many ways to show itself, but I believe that science fiction is one of the best at inciting it.

[Science fiction is] that class of prose narrative treating of a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovation in science or technology, or pseudo-science or pseudo-technology, whether human or extra-terrestrial in origin. It is distinguished from pure fantasy

by its need to achieve verisimilitude and win the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ through scientific plausibility. (Kingsley, Amis)

The important part about science fiction is the fact that in some way, it presents worlds that are possible. The themes in science fiction usually in the future, in a time where no one can truly predict, and therefore a time that anything can happen. The purposes of this curriculum should be focused to the ninth grade of study, with the exploration of literary genre and elements. Science fiction is usually not the best during other courses of education, but it is a useful introduction for those who are less likely to read at all.

The necessary element is that it explores the unknown with themes that are still familiar to young adult readers. It’s important to capture the imagination of young adult readers because that is what will get their attention the fastest, as proven with some of the most popular books for young adults that I’ll also be recommending. After grabbing their attention, it will become more important to explore the themes of choices, fairness, and control that are usually presented in such books.

 Novels like “Ender’s Game” have fantastic examples of young adults dealing with worlds that are out of their control. I would like to focus on “Ender’s Game” in particular, as it is a prime example of the frustration young adults may face. The very first pages of Orson Scott Card’s “Ender’s Game” show that it is not a happy story. There is pain, risk, loss of control, and a society that has lost the ability to choose safer options. More than anything else, though, is the sudden realization that the adults have just as little control as the youth. The book is set in a future of military design, as humanity’s survival is deemed under threat from its second alien invasion. The book goes over frustration in many forms, in a way that young adults and above can understand and learn from.

One of the books most powerful lines can be found in the very beginning:

“The doctor was twisting something at the back of Ender’s head. Suddenly a pain stabbed through him like a needle from his neck to his groin. . . The doctor was trembling; his voice shook as he spoke, “They leave these things in the kids for three years, what do they expect? We could have switched him off, do you realize that? We could have unplugged his brain for all time.” (“Ender’s Game” 1985)

In the first few pages, “Ender’s Game” introduces its readers to very real possibility that the protagonist could have died, without anyone having any real control over that. No one really control when or how someone dies and that is an extremely powerful theme to explore at the start of the novel.

The rest of the story follows Ender as his militaristic government leads him down the grueling path of leadership, before Ender finally destroys the enemy alien species. The story mostly presents two sides: Firstly, there is Ender, who’s brilliant mind struggles with his budding emotions and deep-set fears. Second is the military that has been pushed so far to the breaking point by fear that they are willing to train and test children as if they were adults, even tricking

Ender into unknowingly destroying the alien’s home world to prevent hesitation.

Either side could be argued to have been correct in their judgement, so it will be important to discuss that with your students. It will also be insightful in discussing the topic of control and about the hard choices that were made for the sake of humanity.

Launching the Unit

When dealing with questions like “who was in the right/wrong” that you may explore with this unit, a great thought experiment to start a class with one or more of this preparatory activities.

1) You could select any video on YouTube about the “trolley problem.” You can also discuss this in your own way, but the point is to get the class into thinking about whether a difficult choice is right and why. This will become important for the rest of the unit, as understanding how little control everyone has also shows how difficult choices can be for everyone.

2) Discussion questions or questions for students' writing journals

a. Have you ever felt like you had no control, or that every choice you could make was morally ambiguous? How did you feel in either situation? Did you ever feel like someone had more control than you did and do you still think so?

b. Write about a time where you felt that someone had more control than you and seemed to be making all the wrong choices. Why were those choices wrong? Do you think you could have made the right choices if you were in their shoes?

c. Is self-control easier than controlling a situation outside yourself? Do you think

everyone has the same level of self-control? Why/why not?

3) Choose among a selection of poems about either control or choices. The poems should reflect a sense of either ambiguity or a stark contrast as to who has power and who doesn’t. It will be important to explore the emotions behind either scenario.

“Skimbleshanks: The Railway Cat”

*T.S. Eliot*

…You may say that by and large it is Skimble who's in charge  
Of the Sleeping Car Express.  
From the driver and the guards to the bagmen playing cards  
He will supervise them all, more or less.  
Down the corridor he paces and examines all the faces  
Of the travellers in the First and the Third;  
He establishes control by a regular patrol  
And he'd know at once if anything occurred.  
He will watch you without winking and he sees what you are thinking  
And it's certain that he doesn't approve  
Of hilarity and riot, so the folk are very quiet  
When Skimble is about and on the move.  
You can play no pranks with Skimbleshanks!  
He's a Cat that cannot be ignored;  
So nothing goes wrong on the Northern Mail  
When Skimbleshanks is aboard…

“The Road Not Taken”

*Robert Frost*

 Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;  
  
Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,  
  
And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.  
  
I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

Both of these poems can be used to discuss control and the choices in the lives of your students. T.S. Eliot’s poem is a great example of how to describe an over-bearing figure in a seat of power. You can use the various symbolisms and nods to dictatorship as a way to explore your student’s opinions before reading the novel. Frost’s poem about choices is also an inspiring method about how to describe the road less traveled. Use poems to explore the feelings of powerlessness and not knowing which choice is the right one. Both are key to how young adults understand the world they are growing into, so it will be important to see how they react to such poems. Get the students to bring in poems of their own. Challenge them to find a poem with a view opposite to theirs, then explain why.

As your class reads the book and go through the unit, assign them a challenge. Ask them to find examples of certain themes in sets of ten:

1. Ten examples of characters making choices of ambiguous morality
2. Ten times the protagonist feels powerless
3. Ten responses to the choices made by characters in the novel
4. Ten times where the student feels like they relate to a character in the book (or not, depending on the student)

After they have finished reading the book, students may find that their initial perceptions have changed as the story progressed. Do they feel that the government had no right to do what it did to children? Do they think that Valentine was right in pushing Ender to go to Command School? Was Ender right in destroying Bonzo, or was it his fault that he killed two people? Should Ender feel responsible for destroying an entire species? Do students see similar situations in the world today?

Don’t forget to go back to the writing and discussions before the reading. How have opinions changed, if at all? There is also a film version of “Ender’s Game” that you can show at the end of the class reading. Students can be assigned a homework assignment detailing the various differences between the book and the movie, as well as how those differences affect them in the eyes of their audiences.

Extending the Unit

Literature offers more than just one example of a theme, so there are more novels that illustrate difficult choices and a world outside of a character’s control. Have your students bring in or suggest books with similar themes, finding them on the internet

or in the library. After getting a sufficient list of books have the class divide into groups. Each group will read and then present their findings on the book to the class, showing the various themes and literary devices used in each book. The rest

of the class will take notes on what is presented as a way to show participation for the whole class. The method of presenting can be in various ways.

1. Making a video on the themes of the book
2. Selecting/making music that would fit the book, detailing the meanings for every verse
3. Creating a dialogue between the group, arguing the pros and cons of certain choices in the book.
4. Recreating a scene in the book as a dramatic performance
5. Animating/drawing specific scenes or representations of the book
6. Performing a skit related to an important scene in the book

Young Adult Literature Selections

*The Hunger Games* by Susanne Collins: This story is set after humanity has been nearly destroyed by climate change, futher endangered by the following wars. Katniss Everdeen lives in district 12 of the 12 fenced-in sections of what was once North America. Her district is the poorest, working along all the other districts to feed the capital. Katniss’ family has only survived thanks to her mother’s medical knowledge and her hunting outside the border, despite the risk of the law. This is a great partner to “Ender’s Game”, as it has reached similar

levels in popularity and also has a cinematic counterpart.

*Unwind* by Neal Shusterman: This story is essentially what happens when political border during election year become actual borders. Modern technologies are sold as antiques and the U.S is devastated by war. The divide is between the Life Army and the Choice Brigade, with the federal government having to make a “peaceful compromise.” In this story anyone under 18 can be killed and turned into spare parts for the sick at the discretion of their guardian, called “unwinding.” For young adults, this narrative is symbolic for how many see their relationship with their parents, but pushed to an extreme. In terms of feeling a lack of control, there are few things more domineering than the relationship between a parent and child. That also makes this a fantastic discussion tool for students.

*Divergent* by Veronica Roth: Society is divided into five specific groups (Amity, Erudite, Abnegation, Candor, and Dauntless). Beatrice wishes to go to the dauntless faction more than anything, despite her family belonging to another faction. As she reaches the age to choose for herself. However, not everything will go how she wants, as she proves that you can’t always define a person’s personality into set characteristics. Again, the topic of choices and living under societies rules are key to the novel and worth a read.

*The Golden Compass* by Philip Pullman: This is a story about a girl named Lyra

Belaqua, who lives in a fantastical world unlike any sci-fi before it. Atoms themselves behave on a mysterious principle and every person is born with a shapeshifting animal companion that reflects their personalities. Lyra must find her friend Roger, who has been kidnapped by the “gobblers,” but she will find more than that in her world full of dust that influences atoms and images of another world appearing as northern lights. Students will find the movie adaptation useful to spot the differences between the two mediums.

*The Maze Runner* by James Dashner: Thomas appears among a group of young boys, trapped in the middle of a maze and without any memories of his own besides his name. This is a story that is full of live-or-die choices along with a force that deems to control them all at every turn, even at the end of the book. The amount of discussions that this book can bring about, in terms of right or wrong could span an entire unit on its own, with a movie of its own keep things interesting.

*Matched* by Ally Condie:  It's the story of Cassia Reyes, a 17 year old girl living in a culture has only 100 Songs, 100 Books and 100 Poems available to everyone. Officials control everything, from love to clothing to even when a person dies. 17 year old Cassia is going to be Matched to meet her future spouse. Cassia is Matched with Xander Carrow, her best friend, and she couldn't be happier. But a glitch allows her to also see the face of Ky Markham, an Aberation who isn't to be Matched. But when Cassia begins

to fall in love with him, her whole world changes. What else needs to said in regards to feeling out of control and being given ambiguous choices?

Other choices include:

*Uglies* by Scott Westerfield

*Legend* by Marie Lu

*Enclave* by Anne Aquirre

*Graceling* by Kristin Cashore

*City of Ember* by Jeanne DuPrau

*Delirium* by Lauren Oliver

Concluding Activities

At the end of the unit, your students should have a better understanding of the world around them. One of common answers in each of these stories is that, in a world where no one really has control, the only thing you can really depend on is yourself and the bonds that you’ve made. The most important choices are rarely divided by right or wrong, so the only thing you can do is what you’ll regret the least. Adults try to make the best choices they can because they don’t know what the right way is. Your students will hopefully be able to understand that, as long as you discuss openly about the motives of the antagoists in each of these stories. “Ender’s Game” is especially useful in this because it truly doesn’t have an antagonist that is completely unjustified.

For a final graded activity on the unit, an in-class essay could be assigned, discussing themes found in the book and/or whatever novel each group did their project on. The prompts could have one related to control (as in does anyone really have control of anything, and if so what), while the second could be on how/if one can find a “right” answer to ambiguous choices presented in the novels, with the final question potentially being whatever you and your class decide.

The last activity should be an all-class discussion about what they’ve read, preferably spending a whole class period on this dialogue. This should be a reflection on everything they thought of before, during, and after the unit, with the students all facing the center of the class in a circle and going in a clockwise/counter-clockwise motion. You can even do a volunteer based system, but that may not get the most participation. The key is personal reflection, not observations of the unit.

The most impressive thing about a science fiction novel like “Ender’s Game” is that it is a hypothetical reality that turns the story into one great thought experiment. It allows young adults, as well as anyone else, to suspend disbelief and observe a world not our own, yet still think about issue that it shares with our own. Control is an illusion brought about by people assigning choices into right or wrong categories. Choices are almost always full of grey areas, which inevitably means that there is no arching system that determines how things are. The only thing that can decide what is right or wrong, the only thing we can control, is ourselves. That is what it means to live in a world like ours.

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