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Unit of Study: Young Adults Finding Purpose through Philosophy

**Rationale:**

Life and reality are embodiments of numerous ambiguities. Human beings, born unsure of their purpose on Earth, are taught from a young age specifically how the human experience should be and why. Children are taught the difference between right and wrong based on the community they are born into, while adults are expected to fulfill the various psychological and physical expectations that societies around them have laid out. Throughout history, humanity has sought understanding of these invisible yet impactful expectations that shape the human experience through philosophy. Philosophy is essential to both adults and young adults because it presents numerous answers to significant questions about the giant mysteries of life and reality. Overtime, philosophers have attempted to answer existing questions including morality, free will, death, politics, and existence itself. Authors, like philosophers, have also attempted to answer these mysteries through the stories that they create. Literature is incredibly powerful because it can create an entirely unique society that ultimately suggests readers should analyze how the world works around them. Therefore, works of literature that challenge the rules of various existing societies open up conversations regarding different philosophical theories. Not only would these philosophical works of literature spark compelling class discussions, but they would also inspire readers to analyze its major themes outside the classroom.

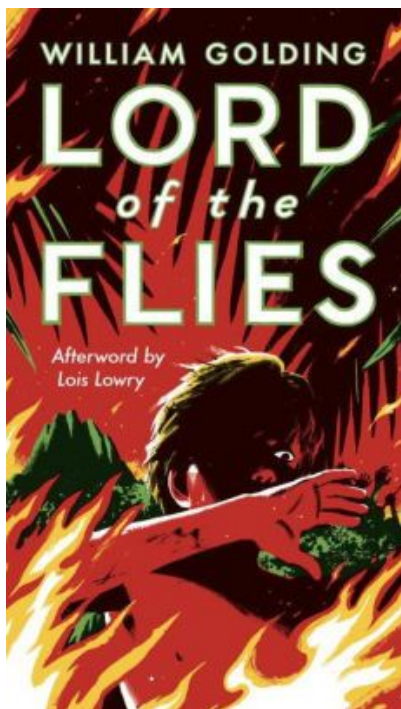
Young adults have just began their journey of self-discovery and understanding of the world around them. They face multiple external issues, which often times distract them from

turning intrinsically and focusing on the value of developing their internal identity. According to *Adolescents in the Search For Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story*, some of the main issues that teens struggle with include pressure from their peers, family troubles, school troubles, emotional struggles, relationship problems, societal expectations, and self-esteem (Warner, 8). Although readers might not live in the dystopia or utopia presented in various works of literature they come across, the power of story is that it can offer multiple answers to existing philosophical questions young adults are beginning to ask themselves. Many teens do not realize the power of literature and how it could positively affect both their internal and external struggles. The stages of literary appreciation presented in *Literature for Today's Young Adults* mentions level 5, when readers are finally able to “go beyond their egocentrism and look at the larger circle of society” (Donelson, 5). It is significant that one of the highest levels of literary appreciation includes the ability of readers to take what they read about the human experience and compare it to the reality around them.

In highschool, my two favorite classes were English and Philosophy; it began to occur to me that the two subjects were intertwined. I truly believe these classes were my favorite because I could apply what I learned from both to the world around me. Like literature, philosophy presents numerous perspectives that examine the relationships between individuals and society, humanity and nature, and truth and knowledge. Canonical works and today's most popular YA literature novels are deeply connected to philosophy. I hope to challenge my students through this unit of study with questions about why the world works in the ways that it does and how philosophy connects to our everyday lives. The canonical, center piece work for my unit of study is *The Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. It is a novel that explores what a community

without rules would look like and whether humans are born evil, which are philosophical concepts explored by Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. This novel immediately made me think of *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, which presents exactly the opposite through exploring how a society works without the concept of free will. Since numerous philosophical questions arise in both novels, I think that these works of literature would challenge students to take a step back and think about how the world works in ways that they never have before. The world is a confusing place—it can be beautiful and incredibly repulsive depending on who you ask or one's current situation.

**Centerpiece Work:**



Source: <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/lord-of-the-flies-william-golding/1100154846#/>

My centerpiece, canonical work of literature for the unit of study is *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. This novel, which I too personally read in highschool, follows the actions of young British school boys ranging from 6-12 years of age that become stranded on an island after a plane crash. These boys are forced to attempt to govern themselves and survive on their own without the presence of adults. The plot is built around the conflict between Ralph and Jack, who struggle for power through two contradicting methods. Ralph is elected leader of the boys and attempts to maintain order through logic and a conch shell, which granted the person holding it permission to speak at community meetings. Jack, who is not happy about Ralph being made leader, is appointed to be in charge of hunting on the island and becomes increasingly violent as the story goes on. The symbolism in this book is one of the main reasons why it is so interesting to me as an aspiring teacher. In my opinion, Ralph represents a society based on democracy and rational rules because he attempts to lead those around him through rational and facts. Jack is a direct contradiction to Ralph; he embodies a society based on violence and dictatorship because he attempts to control his peers through fear, emotions, lies, and alternative facts. How the plot unfolds begs many questions beyond this work of literature including if laws are necessary to society, if people control groups or if groups control people, and whether the nature of evil is inside us all.

While this book was being taught in the English classroom that I was observing, it became apparent to me that there is so much this book presents that could directly benefit young adults in and out of the classroom. Students in the class I was observing were most excited for a Socratic seminar activity at the end of the novel that challenged them to debate over whether the boys should be blamed for their crimes or not. The inclusion of Socrates ultimately inspired me

to create a unit of study that explores how philosophy and literature are related. Socrates is a notable philosopher, who believed that the best way to learn was by answering questions about purpose and reality. The teacher I observed revealed to her class that he said, “I cannot teach anybody anything, I can only make them think,” and, “Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel.” The Socratic seminar embodied these two quotes; it challenged the students to ask and answer philosophical questions that arise in the novel with evidence from the plot itself and previous content from lessons in class. The main question that the Socratic seminar presented during my observation was if these boys should be punished for their murderous crimes and whether they should be tried as adults in court. Students not only talked about evidence from the novel, but also used research articles from outside sources about the development of adolescent brains and how it affects impulse control abilities. In my unit of study, I want to include a Socratic seminar that is focused on philosophical questions about politics and morality.

Besides the relationship between symbolism and philosophy, fear is also a theme that Golding presents throughout the novel. Jack denies fear, Ralph uses fear as a deciding factor in difficult survival decisions, and Piggy thinks that the boys are all afraid of one another. All of the boys are afraid of “The Beast” that they think haunts the island, yet through a conversation with a dead pig head, Simon discovers that this “beast” is actually the evil that is inside all the boys. This idea that there is the capacity for evil in every human being is ultimately tied to Golding’s past experiences in WWII, where he witnessed the shocking evil and cruelty of war. It is plausible that serving in the navy changed his perspective on humanity given that war is a traumatic aspect of history that embodies the loss of innocence and the nature of evil itself. At

the end of the novel, the boys are saved by a British soldier, who is ashamed at the boys “savagery,” but then awkwardly looks at his own war ship and possibly analyzes his involvement in the war. This scene presents a powerful allegory between the violent lifestyle that the boys were living and the harsh reality of warfare. A powerful Socratic seminar that would explore the aspect of fear and evil in this novel would be a discussion about the philosophical theories of the Bible in the Book of Genesis. Students could discuss whether sin and evil are naturally a part of the human experience, or if we are complex creatures capable of doing good and evil.

Although this novel is widely praised, there are some major problems that stood out to me while reading it. The main issue is the underlying concept that living on an island ultimately drives the boys to insanity and “savagery.” I was born and raised on an island and am of Hawaiian ancestry, which is a culture associated with many negative stereotypes. When Europeans first arrived to Hawai‘i, they automatically assumed that the ancient Hawaiians were “savages” because of how they dressed, acted, and who they worshiped. Therefore, the association that this novel presents between islanders and “savagery” is incredibly racist and misleading to me personally. Scenes in the book feature the hunting boys painting their faces and violently killing pigs, which is originally what many Europeans discriminated against ancient islanders for. It is ultimately a goal of mine to end up teaching in Hawai‘i, and I think discussion about what this novel implies about Hawaiian history and islanders in general is incredibly significant.

## Part 1: Launching the Unit

To get students excited about the novel, I would want to turn the classroom into an island. I would decorate the class with island-like props and play some tropical music in the background when students first walk in. We could read the first chapter as a class after doing initial introduction activities, which I will discuss below. I think that engrossing students in the setting that the story unfolds would make class interesting and engaging. Since canonical works can be challenging to teach because of the difficult diction and lengthy chapters, getting students excited on the first day is key to maximizing the success of the unit.



Source: <https://buildingbooklove.com/lord-of-flies-introduction-and/>

Before we begin reading the novel in class, I would challenge students to further put themselves in the shoes of the boys on the island. Each cluster of tables would be a “group” and I would present a series of questions for each group to answer. I would give them a poster and they would discuss, agree upon, and write down their responses to the questions, which they would present to the class after the completion of the activity. I would first prompt students with the following scenario:

- You and the members of your group have survived a plane crash and are now stranded on an island without any adults to help you. The island seems to be deserted, but you have found a freshwater stream for drinking and there are pigs that you and your peers could hunt for food. However, there is no cell phone service and you and your peers are forced to survive on your own and somehow signal passing ships or planes for help.

After reading the scenario, the questions students have to answer as a group would be:

1. If you were stranded on an island and allowed to have anything you need to survive, list 3 things you could not live without and why (no cell phones work because there is no service).
2. Would your new community have laws? If yes, list 3 main laws and a sentence explaining why each law is essential. If not, give a brief rationale explaining why the absence of laws would be beneficial on an island.
3. Would you elect a leader of your community? Why or why not?
4. Would you assign roles and responsibilities to your peers stranded on the island? If yes, what would these roles be? If not, why not?
5. How would you try to signal passing ships or planes for help?

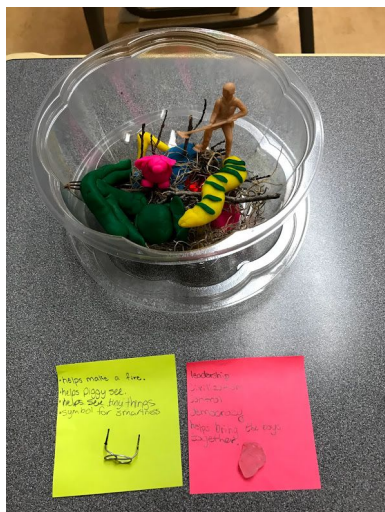
After students are completed with the questions, we would have a class discussion where each group presents their posters and answers. The main purpose of this activity is to familiarize students with the setting of the novel and put themselves into the shoes of the boys, who are stranded on an island. Furthermore, it would get students thinking about whether laws in society are essential or not, which is a concept that the novel explores.



## Part 2: Through Activities

The main goal of this unit of study is to connect works of literature to philosophy. Throughout the unit, I would not only use pop-quizzes to test students knowledge of the reading, but also take 20 minutes of every class for a journal free-write. Similarly to our SSW class entries for 112B, this concept allows students to get their ideas out on paper and think more critically about the literature. The prompts for the journals are as followed:

1. Microcosm Activity: Symbolism is a huge concept throughout the novel. Many of the objects in the book represent motifs or themes that are underlying concepts of the central conflicts presented. For example, the “conch” could represent government institutions and laws, the decapitated pig head could represent evil, and Piggy’s glasses could represent intellectuals and knowledge based on facts or philosophy. As each new object is introduced in the plot, I would have students add them to the mini islands they create and write down the symbolism of each of them in their journals. This idea was taken from Ashley Bible’s blog, *Building Book Love* (<https://buildingbooklove.com/lord-of-flies-introduction-and/>), which gives a step by step instruction and supply list.



Source: <https://buildingbooklove.com/lord-of-flies-introduction-and/>

2. Rousseau v. Hobbes: After showing two YouTube videos about the philosophical theories of Rousseau (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81KfDXTTtXE>) and Hobbes (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9i4jb5XBX5s>). Hobbes argued that humanity is doomed without the social construct of a government in place, while Rousseau believed that humanity is at its best in nature and social order corrupts society. I would challenge students to write about which of the philosophers they agree with more and why using specific evidence from the videos and reality as they know it. After students are done writing, I would then open up discussion to the whole class and have students share strong arguments that favor either of the ideologies presented by both philosophers. We would then discuss as a class how these philosophical ideas relate to the novel and the contradicting political views that Jack and Ralph represent.
3. Character Playlist: In order to further understand the personalities and perspectives of the characters in the novel, I would ask students to list 5 songs that a character would listen to the most and why. Each group or table cluster would randomly draw their assigned character from a hat that I prepare before class. After the characters are assigned, I would have each group discuss and agree on five songs for their character's playlist and write down the titles, artist names, and brief explanations in their journal. When the 20 minutes for journal writing is up, each group would share out their playlist selections and we would further discuss them as a class.
4. Gender Roles: I would begin class by going over a *New York Times* article by Claire Cain Miller called "Many Ways to Be a Girl, but One Way to be a Boy: New Gender Rules,"

which presents expected gender roles in society and how they affect individuals

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/14/upshot/gender-stereotypes-survey-girls-boys.html>

). I would then have students write in their journals how the boy gender rules are applicable to the behavior of the boys in *Lord of the Flies* using specific examples from the article and novel.

5. Spongebob and the Magic Conch: Spongebob was the staple show of my childhood and I had no idea that it explored the aspect of the conch shell in the *Lord of the Flies*. I would begin class by showing a clip from the specific episode that features Spongebob, Patrick, and Squidward making their decisions through guidance from a “magic conch” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-IUE0idp7k>).” This is an interesting parody first presented by the novel, where the conch was used by Ralph and Piggy as a means of maintaining order. I would then prompt students to connect the “guidance” from the conch and how the boys made decisions on the island. Students would answer questions about how they make decisions in their lives. Are they like Ralph, who relies on common sense and order, or are they more like Jack, who is more individualistic and destructive?

After the completion of the novel, I would challenge students with a closing discussion in the form of a Socratic seminar. It would be similar to the Socratic seminar that I observed in the classroom I visited, but have different questions. Before the seminar takes place, students will be given a chart to fill out for homework about two prompts in class so that they can prepare their discussion points. They will also be required to come up with 3 thought-provoking questions, get others involved, and refer to evidence from the text and other credible sources. The class

will be split up into two groups the day of the seminar: one inner circle of those actively participating in the discussion and one outer circle who will pay attention to the discussion and give feedback about their partner's participation from the inner circle. Discussion will go on for 10 minutes and then the inner and outer circles will switch seats so that everyone gets a chance to talk about either of the two prompts. Respect is key during the seminar and it should be treated more of a discussion than a debate. The prompt will be randomly drawn for either group (students should be prepared for either question the day of) and would be either:

1. In the *Lord of the Flies*, the boys are introduced to a concept of living without rules or laws, and it ultimately falls apart. However, a society with too many laws in place, such as North Korea or prison, are miserable to live in. Would you rather live in a society with too many laws or no laws at all? Are laws more harmful than helpful to society?
2. Golding suggests that evil naturally exists inside all of us as humans. Are people automatically born evil, good, or both?

After the Socratic seminar, students will be assigned a reflection paper for homework in which they answer one of the questions thoroughly using examples from the novel, arguments from their classmates, or outside sources.

### **Part 3: Moving Beyond the Unit**

There are many YA novels that I could pair with the *Lord of the Flies* upon its completion in class. The goals of these novels would be to further analyze society as we know it and discuss how various philosophical standpoints are valid or not. There are as followed:

1. *The Giver* by Lois Lowry: This novel, which I have personally read for the book to film paper, is about a society that has eliminated the concept of free will. The absence of free will is directly contradicting to the society presented in the *Lord of the Flies*, where the boys are living without laws. I would have students compare the societies of both of these novels and write a paper explaining which society they would rather live in and why. Both suggest underlying philosophical aspects of Rousseau and Hobbes, which I would have students utilize as evidence for the reasoning behind their choice in their papers.
2. *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins: *The Hunger Games* is one of my favorite books from highschool. Both *The Hunger Games* and the *Lord of the Flies* involve teenagers having to survive with odds against them. Similarly to Golding's canonical piece of literature, Collins presents that the fight for survival can be humanizing or dehumanizing, depending on the character involved. I would have students analyze and find similarities or differences between the characters of each novel.
3. *Scar Island* by Dan Gemeinhart: This novel, which I have not read yet, was brought to my attention by Professor Warner and has appalling ties to the *Lord of the Flies*. A freak accident strands boys from a troubled group school on an island without any adults to guide them. Just like the scenario Golding presents, the boys have to figure out how to escape danger and save themselves. I would have students compare characters and plots from both novels and end the unit with another Socratic seminar regarding morality and consequences.

4. *After the First Death* by Robert Cormier: This YA novel that we have read this semester brings up an interesting discussion about the philosophical question of whether humans are born evil or not. Miro and Atkin are terrorists that Americans see as evil, but they their countries consider them heroes. In both the *Lord of the Flies* and *After the First Death*, teenage characters are forced to make decisions and analyze their self-identity and relationships with others.
5. *Harry Potter and The Prisoner of Azkaban* by J.K. Rowling: After completing this novel during the semester, fear was an essential theme that stuck out to me. The dementors are often thought of as metaphors of fear, while Professor Lupin's students are forced to face their deepest fears in order to combat a boggart. In the *Lord of the Flies*, the boys fear the imaginary beast and are vastly influenced by fear when making decisions on the island. I would have students analyze the aspect of fear presented in both of these novels and discuss how fear plays an aspect in their lives and the world around them.
6. *Witness* by Karen Hesse: *Witness*, one of my favorite books we have read this semester, presents philosophical issues like racism and discrimination that are deeply rooted in history. In both *Witness* and the *Lord of the Flies*, teens are challenged with making decisions and conforming to the societal rules or expectations around them. I would have students compare the characters and societies presented in the novels and reveal how Jack, who utilized fear as a control tactic, behaved similarly to the Klu Klux Klan.

**Concluding the Unit:**

1. Final Presentation: After pairing the *Lord of the Flies* with one of these YA novels, I would have students present the similarities and differences that they found within each of the plots with groups of their choosing. This final project would include themes and philosophical concepts found in both novels and reveal how our realities are shaped by certain laws and ideologies. I would challenge students to use examples from both texts and from real life in their presentations. They would also be required to include their collective answers from one of the journal prompts from each novel (two journal prompts total) and explain the significance of their entry to their overall understanding of the story.
2. Extra Credit: As an extra credit opportunity, students would be able to attend the *Lord of the Flies* movie after school in my classroom. I would play the 1990 version, which was directed by Harry Hook. This idea was inspired from my observation hours, where a similar opportunity was offered. After viewing the movie, students would write a 1-2 page paper in which they write a film analysis that compares the novel and the movie.

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