

***1984*; Teaching Dystopic Novels in the Classroom**
Unit of Study

Rational:

This Unit of Study focuses on George Orwell's canonical work *1984*. I chose this canonical text because dystopias have been very prevalent in popular culture today. While many students tend to fear canonical texts for their complex themes and messages, I believe that students would gravitate towards Orwell's *1984*. The novel is powerful because many of the predictions Orwell made in the novel are reflected in our world today; the text is clearly ahead of its time. Students constantly want to apply what they learn in class to the real world; the themes and messages addressed in the novel can be applied to the world we live in today.

Also, *1984* possesses many of the Exeter qualities that are discussed in *Literature for Today's Young Adults* (Donelson). The novel has a highly imaginative plot that is exciting because it is not too far fetched from the world we live in today. Winston, the novel's protagonist, is a unique character who does not display predictable traits. While the diction of the novel is complex, it enriches the reading rather than takes away from the overall experience. As stated earlier, the various themes of the novel, such as the threat of technology, manipulation and control over history, are reflected in our world today. The many themes of the novel also touch readers; after reading the text, many students are effected by Orwell's message. The novel is meant to instill fear and encourage citizens to question the acts of political leaders; the book warns readers with the image of what the world could be like. This message resonates with many students. The most valuable Exeter quality that is reflected in *1984* is the level of sophistication in the text. The complex diction allows students to further develop their reading skills.

Many contemporary young adult novels are set in dystopias. Young adults today gravitate

towards books like Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* and Ally Condie's *Matched*. In Judith A. Hayn's *Teaching Young Adult Literature Today*, Hayn encourages teachers to incorporate YA dystopic novels in the classroom; "it is critical that teachers provide the space for students to read and process the implications of these dystopian novels...We must help them find answers to the question...'What can I do to prevent such a world?'" (Hayn 101). Using YA literature in the classroom enhances the students' reading of a canonical text; "The tradition of the classical cannon is strong in our educational system, and we need to make a strong case for enhancing or replacing those books with young adult titles" (Wadham 7). I believe it would be very effective to pair up *1984* with a YA dystopian novel.

Also, many students read these contemporary YA novels, but are unaware of the fact that the authors of these novels were inspired by Orwell's *1984*. When Condie was asked what inspired her work, *Matched*, she stated that she was greatly influenced by *1984*. *Matched* incorporates similar themes that are addressed in *1984*. I would use *Matched* or *The Hunger Games* in the classroom in order to enhance the students' reading of *1984*, and to further enforce the themes of the novel and dystopias in general. YA literature is complex and meaningful. I believe it is a great practice to link a YA text with a canonical work in order to enhance the students' reading.

Introduction to the Unit

I believe that it is always beneficial to start a unit with humor. When introducing the text to students, I would first play them *Every Breath You Take* by the Police. While the song is meant to be romantic, the lyrics can be viewed through a dark lens and applied to Orwell's *1984*. In Oceania, the government is always watching the citizens; no one can escape surveillance. The lyrics in this song reflect the theme of surveillance perfectly "Every game you play / Every night you stay / I'll be watching you" (AZ lyrics). I think the most powerful lyrics in the song that reflect the message of *1984* are "Oh can't you see / You belong to me?" (AZ lyrics). In Oceania, the government makes it clear that they own each citizen; no one is an individual or their own person. Although Winston believes he is in

charge of his own destiny, thoughts and actions, he is not. By the end of the novel, Wilson realizes he does, in fact, belong to the Oceania government. While this song may be a humerus way to introduce this text to students, I believe it effectively gives students an insight to the themes of the novel. After playing the song, there would be a discussion, as a class, discussing the students' thoughts and reaction to the song.

Some questions I would ask to get the class discussion started are:

- What would you do if someone could watch everything you do?
 - How would you feel?
- What would you do if you could no longer think for yourself; what would you do if you could not be an individual / your own person?
 - How would you feel?

Historical Context of the Text

In order to give students and insight on the text, I would introduce them to the historical context of the novel. Orwell moved to Spain in 1936 in order to report on the Spanish Civil War; while he was there, he was able to witness, firsthand, how terrible fascist political regimes could be. During this time, Orwell was able to see totalitarians come into power, such as Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin. His experience reporting on the Spanish Civil War influenced his politically charged writing in *1984*. The author's history will help the students' understanding of the text. The author intended the book to be explicit and instill fear in readers; Orwell felt obligated to warn all citizens after he witnessed the negative outcomes of a totalitarian regime.

Characteristics of a Dystopia

Once students begin reading the novel, I will discuss the characteristics of a dystopic society. Below, I have listed numerous characteristics of a dystopia found from *Fac Web* by Terri Chung. In class, I will discuss each of these characteristic in detail. After the discussion, I would ask students to find an example of each of the listed characteristics in the text. Students will be asked to use direct

quotations from *1984*. After the students complete the assignment, we will then come together as a class and discuss their findings.

Characteristics of a Dystopia (Chung):

- Propaganda is used to control the citizens of society.
- Information, independent thought, and freedom are restricted.
- A figurehead or concept is worshipped by the citizens of the society.
- Citizens are perceived to be under constant surveillance.
- Citizens have a fear of the outside world.
- Citizens live in a dehumanized state.
- The natural world is banished and distrusted.
- Citizens conform to uniform expectations. Individuality and dissent are bad.
- The society is an illusion of a perfect utopian world.

Writing Prompt: Technology How Far is Too Far?

Today, our world is almost entirely ruled by technology. Technological advances have allowed us to do many things that we could have never imagined doing just ten years ago. However, many people fail to see the downside to technology, especially teens. In the novel, technology is used to monitor and manipulate all citizens in Oceania; telescreens, microphones and cameras are used to track a citizen's every move. Orwell's *1984* challenges the idea that technology is purely positive; he introduces readers to the negative side of technology. For homework, I would assign a short essay where students would respond to this specific prompt: *How has technology negatively affected society today?* I believe this prompt is not only beneficial for the further understanding of the text, but it also makes students question their constant attachment to cell phones, laptops and portable electronics in general.

Class Discussion; *1984* ahead of its time?

Orwell's *1984* is often said to be ahead of its time. In order to further emphasize this idea; I will

give students a brief introduction to the USA Patriot Act. The Patriot Act, while not as drastic, allows the US government to act in similar ways to the Oceania government in the novel;

“The USA PATRIOT Act, which was hastily passed by Congress and signed by President George W. Bush, following the mayhem of September 11, 2001, sets a Presidential priority of vastly upgrading ‘national security’ programs and activities.

Many believe this has been enacted at the expense of protecting liberties guaranteed in the Bill of Rights.” (Mertz)

For homework, I would assign students to look up, and become more familiar with aspects of the Patriot Act. After gathering enough information, students will be required to relate their findings to the novel. I would also encourage student to find other evidence that shows how Orwell's predictions have been proven right in today's world. Students would then bring their notes to class and participate in the class discussion about *1984* being ahead of its time. This discussion would further emphasize Orwell's purpose of writing the book and help with the students' understanding of the novel.

YA Dystopic Literature: Book Group Project

In order to enhance the reading of Orwell's *1984*, I would incorporate YA dystopic literature in the classroom. After reading *1984*, students would pick a novel from a list of three options and join a book group. In the book groups, the students would discuss their choice novel and find similarities and differences between their novel and *1984*. This project will familiarize students with dystopic characteristics and will further instill the themes of *1984*. Using a YA text to enhance the reading of a canonical work is not only effective but students also enjoy it.

Book Group Novel OPTIONS:

- Suzanne Collins *The Hunger Games*

In the ruins of a place once known as North America lies the nation of Panem, a shining Capitol surrounded by twelve outlying districts. Each year, the districts are forced by the Capitol to send one boy and one girl between the ages of twelve and eighteen to participate in the Hunger Games, a brutal

and terrifying fight to the death – televised for all of Panem to see (Scholastic).

- Ally Condie *The Hunger Games*

This futuristic coming-of-age novel is based on a classic premise: that of a future society that seems to have solved the problem of human happiness by making every "right choice" for its citizens. Readers will see the flaw in eliminating free will from the very first pages, but they won't be able to look away as Cassia discovers two truths as old as humankind: that there is no joy without personal liberty, and love is a mystery that can be embraced but never solved (Scholastic).

- Nancy Farmer *The House of the Scorpion King*

As Matt struggles to understand his existence, he is threatened by a sinister cast of characters, including El Patron's power-hungry family, and he is surrounded by a dangerous army of bodyguards. Escape is the only chance Matt has to survive. But escape from the Alacran Estate is no guarantee of freedom, because Matt is marked by his difference in ways he doesn't even suspect (Scholastic).

Work Cited

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Prezi Presentation

Slide One:

“I'll Be Watching You”

The Police: *Every Breath You Take*

Every breath you take
Every move you make
Every bond you break
Every step you take
I'll be watching you.
Every single day
Every word you say
Every game you play
Every night you stay
I'll be watching you.
Oh can't you see
You belong to me?

Youtube Video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PqU5e-ZT7Gk>

Slide 2:

“What is a Dystopia?”

- Propaganda is used to control the citizens of society.
- Information, independent thought, and freedom are restricted.
- A figurehead or concept is worshipped by the citizens of the society.
- Citizens are perceived to be under constant surveillance.
- Citizens have a fear of the outside world.
- Citizens live in a dehumanized state.
- The natural world is banished and distrusted.
- Citizens conform to uniform expectations. Individuality and dissent are bad.
- The society is an illusion of a perfect utopian world.

Picture: <http://weknowmemes.com/generator/uploads/generated/g133252315370634087.jpgk>

Slide 3:

“Technology; How Far is Too Far?”

Writing Prompt:

- How has technology negatively affected society

today?

Slide 4:

“Is *1984* coming true?”

Class Discussion: How have parts of Orwell's novel been proven true today?

i.e. The Patriot Act

Images:

<http://www.occupy.com/sites/default/files/aa-1984-not-supposed-to-be-instruction-manual-good-one.jpg>

<http://homefront.homestead.com/files/1984button.gif>

Slide 5:

“YA Dystopic Literature”

Book Clubs:

Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins

Matched by Ally Condie

House of the Scorpion King by Nancy Farmer

Images

Images: <http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/article/spotlight-teen-fiction>

1984 by George Orwell



Technology: How far is too far?

Writing Prompt:
How has technology negatively affected society today?



What is a Dystopia?

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- Information, independent thought, and freedom are restricted.
- A government or concept is worshipped by the citizens of the society.
- Citizens are destined to be under constant surveillance.
- Citizens have a fear of the outside world.
- Citizens live in a dehumanized state.
- The natural world is corrupted and destroyed.
- Citizens conform to societal expectations, individuality and dissent are lost.
- The society is an illusion of a perfect utopian world.



I'll be watching you...

The Police: Every Breath You Take
Every move you make
Every bond you break
Every step you take
I'll be watching you.

Every single day
Every word you say
Every game you play
Every night you stay
I'll be watching you.

Oh can't you see
You belong to me?



Is 1984 Coming True?

Class Discussion: How have parts of Orwell's novel been proven true today?
- I.e. The Patriot Act



YA Dystopic Literature

- Book Clubs
- *Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins
 - *Matched* by Ally Condie
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1984 by George Orwell



Technology: How far is too far?

Writing Prompt:

- How has technology negatively affected society today?



<http://www.museumofartandtechnology.com/1984/>

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<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/1984/>

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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PaUSe-ZT7Gk>

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<http://www.homesite.com/files/1984/1984.htm>



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Book Clubs

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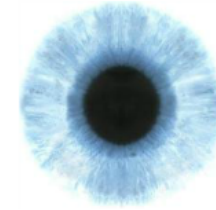
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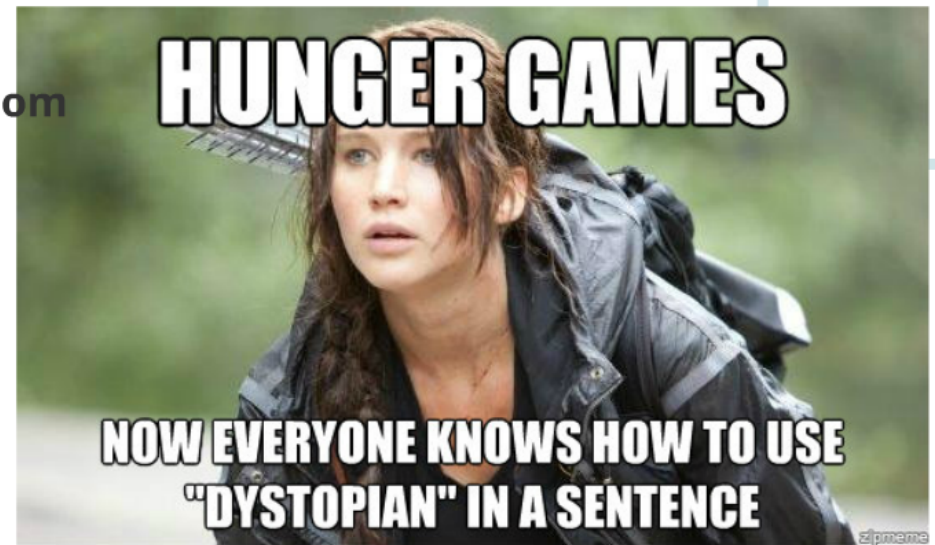


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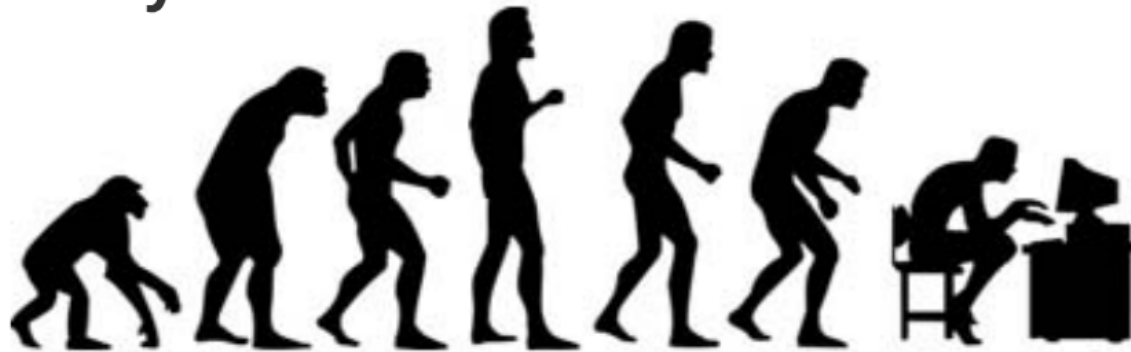
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Technology: How far is too far?



Writing Prompt:

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<http://www.innesco.co.uk/assets/Evolution-of-technology-437x212.jpgk>

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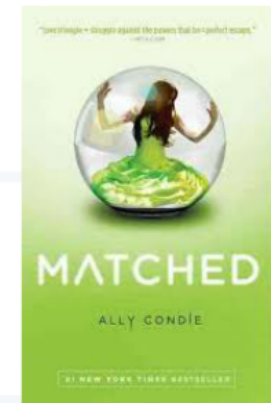
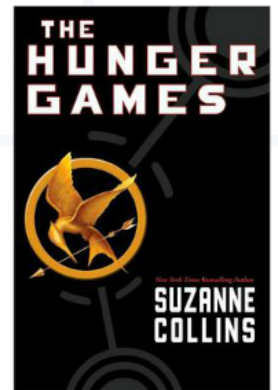


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1984 by George Orwell



Technology: How far is too far?

Writing Prompt:

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<http://www.museumofscienceandtechnology.com/1984/>

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