

Teaching in the Classroom Through Dystopic and Utopic Literature

My Rationale:

Dystopia and Utopia have long been featured in academic curriculum, and using these genres as springboards lets educators launch into enlightening discussions that allow them to impart various lessons regarding the English language and beyond. There are many themes that are expressed using both utopia and dystopia, and they are often well received by students and pleasure readers alike. However, teachers often neglect to impart the significance of such topics and the role that those genres play in their lessons.

The purpose of this unit of study is to introduce children to the general metaphor that surrounds these discussions and to help them acclimate to the idea that their expectations are not always realistic and that the world is much harsher than they generally expect it to be. This unit is not meant to shock the students into reality all at once, but to slowly disillusion them and to help them mature as naturally as possible. By introducing them to this admittedly depressing reality, it will help to temper their expectations and prepare them, not only for the adult world, but also to introduce them to an exhilarating and thought provoking genre.

My own introduction to dystopia and utopia was not until after my first year of college, not too soon after I had sunk into a small fit of depression due to a death in the family. There, my professor introduced me to an anthology of science fiction novels that focused on a series of small changes that turned each of their versions of Earth into a veritable paradise until something went immeasurably wrong. Wishing that I had been introduced to such a book back in my

required educational days, I took every lesson the anthology had to offer to heart, and it helped to lift me out of my funk. It is from that experience that this unit springs forth, giving me the motivation to want to help students who suffer from various issues themselves.

My Introduction:

To begin this unit, I would begin with the radiocast that panicked an entire nation in 1938, the broadcast drama of H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*. Every person who listened to this broadcast thought that the world was indeed under a hostile invasion. For that moment, the world was a dystopia, a world where the worst had happened. After discussing the video on the radio broadcast, we will talk about the ramifications of this event and how they think they would react if something similar was done in this era.

I'll ask my students a series of questions, such as if the radio play held their attention, if they cared about any of the characters, or what gave the play believability. From here, the students would complete a short writing prompt about how they would go about doing something similar to what Orson Welles did. After this short writing period, the students will have the opportunity to share what they wrote and discuss the definitions of both utopian and dystopian societies and what our society can be defined as. I will ask them to remember this discussion at various points in the unit and the classification that we decided on as a class.

My Curriculum:

In addition to Welles' radio play, there are several books, canonized and not, which can be used to teach the lessons that I'm hoping to impart. To begin with, I'd start with the center piece book that I introduced the unit with, *War of the Worlds*. We'll discuss the various tragedies that the main character experiences and how his experiences can parallel various events that

occur in the real world. As an out of class assignment, the students will look through various excerpts from other works such as Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, and Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, which was adapted into the movie *Blade Runner*, a film that we'll watch in class, and take notes each of work to compare against *War of the Worlds*.

Using *War of the Worlds* as a transition, we'll launch into the seemingly perfect utopia that is present in Lois Lowry's *The Giver*. While we read the book, I'll ask them to make a list of every aspect of day to day life in Lawry's world that is different from ours. After we finish, we'll launch into discussion about the pros and cons of each difference and how Jonas reacted to this utopic society once he was given memories of experiences similar to those in our world. I'll reopen the discussion on our classification of which type of society our world is and gauge their reaction to the so called 'perfect society' that forces its culture to abandon diversity and individuality.

From *The Giver*, we'll move onto William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. As an in-class group project, I'll split the class into groups of four or five and have each student in control of an force of five or so imaginary people (around twenty to twenty five people) who have been stranded on an island like the characters in *Lord of the Flies*. Each group will have a arbitrary set of resources given to them and will be charged with having as many people survive until we finish reading the book. Near the end of each class, I'll ask them to get into their groups and be ready to deal with an event that resembles something that happened in the book which will either threaten their people or their resources. After the project ends, I'll ask the students various questions based on their experience with the book and their groups such as how well does the

boys' self-contained society function, do people control groups or do groups control people, and are morals a restriction or a guiding force?

Towards the end of the unit, I'll ask the students to create a piece of media that features a utopia or dystopia. They will be allowed to work in groups of up to four or five and have the option of using any of the works that we covered in the unit or creating their own world. In addition to allowing me to critique them on their understanding of the genre, it will also help to foster creativity and cohesion amongst the students.

Sample Assignments:

Using Orson Welles' broadcast of *War of the Worlds* as an example, what fictional story do you think would cause the same reaction of public fear today and why? This story can come from any media, such as TV, books, movies, etc., or it can be one that you come up with yourself. If you don't think the public would react like they did to the 1938 broadcast, why do you think such? Answer this prompt as best you can until time is up.

In this in-class assignment, you will be in control of five imaginary people who have been stranded on an island like Jack and Ralph in *Lord of the Flies*. Your objective is to have as many people survive over the course of the next few weeks while maintaining your own society. With your group, you may establish any laws or leadership positions you want. Write down any rules or positions you create on two pieces of paper and turn one of them into me. After you have done so, you will be given a set of resources that will help your group survive. In each class session, your group will have to deal with various events that threaten your people and resources.

After each session, record the events and your thoughts on what happened in your journal in entries of two to three hundred words or more.

Works Cited

- Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. New York: Scholastic, 2008. Print.
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