

Karissa Fite
ENGL112B
Dr. Warner
May 12, 2015

Unit of Study: Linking Dystopian Literature to the Real World

Rationale:

Think back to the time when you were an adolescent – when the rules and ways of the world didn't seem to make sense and people were always telling you what to do. There may have been things that you cared about – water conservation, recycling, and free access to education and clean drinking water for people worldwide. As a young adult, you may have often felt helpless, unable to change the things in the world that you wanted to, and unable to help make a positive difference in the lives of yourself and others. Today's youth often feel the same – as though the world is ever-changing and evolving and, while some changes reflect positively in the world, others are seemingly unjust. Although students may often feel as though they have no voice or that they personally cannot initiate or aid in social change, dystopian literature teaches them that they can. Rather than remaining silent bystanders and watching negative change, or the general absence of a positive change, take place within the world, the characters of these dystopian novels take a stand. These novels teach students to put into perspective the culture in which they live in contrast with other less fortunate communities while teaching them to be courageous and take a stand against the social injustices they may witness in their immediate lives as well as throughout the global community.

While dystopian literature shows students that they have the power to take a stand for what he or she believes in, dystopian literature simultaneously introduces another very real life lesson: try as he or she might, the hero may not always necessarily win. To demonstrate that, the centerpiece for this unit, George Orwell's *1984*, supplies a strong protagonist who stands up for

what he believes but, despite his best efforts, in the end the character is left with a broken spirit and defeated, another victim of the controlling Party. Students may gather from this that in order to make a positive change in the world, they must be prepared to face any obstacle, and that changing a system does not come easily. Although the novel ends on a dismal and somewhat unresolved note, it teaches students that one person can cause societal change, but they have to be willing to do what no one else is, perhaps even becoming a martyr for the cause. This subject matter is very heavy and may be hard to grasp for some students, but it disillusiones students to the idea that the hero always wins while encouraging them to take a stand for their beliefs and the rights of both themselves and others.

In contrast with the fall of Orwell's character, other and more contemporary young adult dystopian literature features young protagonists who stand up for their causes and, at great personal risks and sacrifices, make a positive change in their own worlds. Books like *Hunger Games*, *Matched*, and *The City of Ember* boast protagonists that take matters into their own hands in order to set positive change in action. Pairing a canonical in-class text with additional readings both in class and at home, students will be able to see the various forms of oppression that different, fictitious cultures endure through. Through comparison of texts, group discussions, critical analysis, journaling, and exploring real world issues that connect thematically to the overall themes of dystopia and social injustices, students will be able to explore the many ways in which people are deprived of basic human rights that they are afforded the luxury of having, and be able to see how one voice can affect great change.

In addition to a central work that we will be exploring together both in class and at home and a secondary work with which students will do the same, I plan to do work with in-class short stories for students to discuss. With each piece of literature, students will be conducting close

readings and discussions, notes from each of which they will be asked to keep track of in an Annotation Journal. In this journal they will be able to take notes, analyze quotes, and identify themes and literary devices they see throughout the texts. They will be able to free write and gather their thoughts and notes to help them in discussions, to prepare for exams, and most importantly, to prepare for their unit projects. Writing, in my opinion, is just as important as discussing a text out loud. Making journaling a mandatory component of the unit ensures that students are actively engaging in the materials and helps them prepare for upcoming assignments and refine their reading and organizational skills for future courses and higher education.

Introduction to the Unit:

Upon entering the class on the first day of this unit, students will be asked to take their seats as usual. Today, however, we will be discussing a school wide change, as reflected in our new Class Rules. These alterations have been changed in accordance with the rules that the administration and teaching staff have agreed upon in a recent staff meeting. The new Class Rules will be presented to the class on school letterhead (Handout).

After presenting these new rules to the students I will give them a few moments to process and voice their feelings and concerns, which will undoubtedly be full of comments about the unfairness of the whole situation. I will then launch into the unit, explaining to them that this is what it is like to live in a dystopian society. In a dystopian culture, people are often oppressed and stripped of their rights in order to make individuals powerless so that all of the power is reserved for a government or organization, which is often corrupt. I will then ask the students to journal briefly about how it felt to have their voices, opinions, and individuality revoked while considering the following:

- What would it be like to live in this kind of society?

- What if these rules weren't being made exclusively to school, but for their life as a whole?
- Imagine what it would be like to be told who you can and cannot speak to in your life, what you can and cannot wear, what you can and cannot do, and what you can and cannot speak or think about?

Centerpiece and Accompanying Young Adult Literature:

After journaling I will ask volunteers to share what they have written, and then introduce the unit centerpiece, George Orwell's *1984*. I will introduce Orwell as an author, the historical context of the text, and explain propaganda by using various forms of media. First, with visual propaganda ads that may be relevant to the students with [Hollywood propaganda used for popular films](#), and then by sharing the infamous [Apple commercial that parodies 1984](#). I will ask students to help identify what idea the ads are propagating and ask for examples they may recognize from popular culture to make sure they have a grasp on the concept. After getting an introduction to the text, propaganda, and some key definitions (dystopia, utopia, propaganda, etc.) we will begin reading the text in class. Although most of the reading will be done in class and Annotation Journals and discussion will be utilized daily, some chapters may be assigned at home as well.

As the class read *1984* in the classroom, I will also assign an accompanying young adult novel to give students a more comprehensive idea of dystopian themes and give them more material to explore on their own. For this secondary text I will conduct a brief book talk and pass in class. In this pass I will include both canonical and non-canonical works in order to give students a sample of contemporary writing as well as the works that launched the dystopian genre into popularity in recent decades. By pairing the centerpiece with a an additional dystopian

work, students will see that although the specifics of social issues may vary from text to text, the overarching theme of social injustices, oppression, and inequality remains prevalent in dystopian literature and the characters in these texts are required to act upon instinct, courage, and bravery to overcome a power that they know is inherently wrong. Included in this book talk and pass will be books that fit within the canon, both classics and contemporary young adult literature, giving students an opportunity to preview texts and then decide which they would like to work with:

- *Hunger Games*, Suzanne Collins
- *Matched*, Ally Condie
- *The Giver*, Lois Lowry
- *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury
- *The City of Ember*, Jeanne DuPrau

After hosting the book talk and pass students will be asked to rank their top three choices and will be put into small groups based on which book they end up with. Throughout the unit students will be gathering together in their groups to discuss themes, conduct close readings, and to discuss their group project, which will be to create a form of propaganda – either a skit or film, a song, a poster or billboard, brochures, etc. – to present to the class at the end of the unit.

In addition to reading through *1984* and the accompanying text, I plan to also give students short stories to be read and discussed in class, such as Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery” and Kurt Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergerson”. These short stories will allow students to take a break from *1984* in class and give us other authors and social justice issues to discuss. The point of reading these stories as a class is to help students contextualize the story and put it in perspective to their own lives – what if they were made handicapped because of their intelligence? What if annually, for no certain reason, a sacrifice had to be made? The idea behind “Harrison Bergerson” particularly is similar to the unit launch’s threat of grouping students by grade. Asking them to reflect back to the unit launch, they will journal on their thoughts about

this type of controlling culture. Both “The Lottery” and “Harrison Bergerson” offer a macabre sense of humor that I think will entertain the students, making it easier for them to approach the idea of a dystopian culture.

Extending the Unit:

Discussing dystopian societies in literature enables students to start to think about issues and injustices in the real world. Dystopian literature is an introduction to social injustices and upheaval, corruption of individuals and governments, chaos and oppression, an absence of individuality and free access to knowledge, and an utter lack of equality. Discussing these themes help students put their lives and rights into perspective while realizing that some real life cultures experience the deprivation of many of the rights to which every human is supposedly entitled. In order to help students understand this and to link the text to current issues, I would consider assigning students with the task to find articles via news sites, newspapers, or magazines that demonstrate issues similar to those in their novels. By exploring real life issues in conjunction with dystopian themes students will expand their knowledge of both literature and the world in which they live. As they begin to understand that social injustices are very much real and present in the lives of many people around our world, it will bring them the awareness that not only are they privileged to not suffer such things, but that they have the power to cause change. Much like the heroes in our novels, students will learn that they too can find the courage and strength within them to take the initiative to take a stand against the injustices in our own culture.

To conclude the unit I will assign a group propaganda project, as previously outlined. Additionally, students will be assigned individual analysis essays in which they will be asked to draw comparisons and/or contrasts in the novels they read, an analysis of the overall genre or

themes present in any of the readings, how our global community may or may not resemble a dystopian culture, or any other applicable topics involving the readings. And finally, because this unit is so heavy and can be dark and dismal, I plan to end the unit on a lighter note – by having students listen to “Imagine” by The Beatles. Students will be given a print out of the lyrics as they listen and read through in class. Following listening to the song, I will ask students to think about the differences in the world the song describes compared to the cultures presented in the books we’ve just read. As I play the song through again a few times I will allow the students some time for in class journaling before sharing their thoughts, bringing the unit to a close.

It is my hope that through the reading of various injustices in fictional dystopian worlds as well as in the real world students will begin to expand the borders of their mind and world. My goal is to help them to appreciate the freedoms in their lives while exploring ways to change the things they do not agree with in their lives, whether it is racial, socio-economic issues, corruption, or other problems they see within their culture and around the world. Probably more importantly, I want students to realize that they are citizens of a global community and that they have the potential to initiate change, just as many of the characters in the texts have.

Unit Launch Handout

May 12, 2015

Parents and Students:

In order to create an environment more conducive to learning, and to make the most of our precious little time in class, the staff has come together in agreement that we will be adopting new campus rules, effective immediately. We believe that these rules will minimize distractions and help students achieve their highest educational potential. We thank you for your compliance in our shared interest in fostering education and growth within the student body.

1. In order to eliminate distraction in the classroom a new dress code will go into effect immediately. Students are expected to wear only khaki pants and plain black or white collared shirts. Anyone found in violation of this dress code faces suspension on the first offence and possible expulsion upon the second (to be determined by the principal).
2. For the sake of productivity, the school's morning break period is being reduced to 10 minutes, and lunch reduced to 25.
3. All electronic devices will be handed over to your teacher at the beginning of each class period and returned to you at the end of class.
4. To help students focus, all clocks will be removed from classrooms. No student may ask the time or pack to exit the classroom prior to being given their teacher's permission.
5. Students will be grouped together by class grades in order to help each student perform better. The students who currently have A's will be one group, B's in another group, C's in a third, D's in a fourth, and F's in a fifth. Students must work within these groups at all times and MAY NOT be found communicating outside of their groups during the class period.
6. All class discussion will be limited. You may not speak out of turn or to one another unless I call on you directly.

Thank you for your efforts in making our students the best.

(Principal's Signature)

Works Cited

History, Mac. "1984 Apple's Macintosh Commercial (HD)." *YouTube*. YouTube, 1 Feb. 2012. Web. 11 May 2015.

Vary, Adam B. "12 Times Hollywood's Used Propaganda To Sell Its Movies." *BuzzFeed*. BuzzFeed, 30 May 2014. Web. 3 May 2015.