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Unit of Study

**Standing Up to Injustice: Speaking Up and Speak Out**

Today’s students are exposed to more media than ever before, and one major theme dominating today’s media is the struggle for justice in an unjust world. From police shootings to wrongful convictions to the vilification of activists and reformers to the snap judgments that people make about their peers, teenagers are surrounded by stories of injustice and persecution and are often victims of injustice themselves. As an English teacher, I feel that I am perfectly positioned to offer students a vision of a different way, a better way—a world where people feel empowered to speak up against injustice and fight for what is right. Due to the sensitive nature of this topic and the need to have mature, thoughtful discussions, this unit is geared toward high school Juniors and Seniors and could be tied into either an American Literature course or an AP English literature course. The central work of the unit, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, is a contemporary young adult novel that tells the story of a young Black girl who witnesses the police shooting of her unarmed Black friend as she navigates family issues and relationship drama, all while being the only person who can tell a story that needs to be heard—a story that is deeply moving and very relevant to current events.

“Others are fighting too, even in the Garden, where sometimes it feels like there’s not a lot worth fighting for. People are realizing and shouting and marching and demanding. They’re not forgetting. I think that’s the most important part.” (443, Thomas)

The Hate U Give is incredibly relevant to contemporary culture because of how it addresses police violence and racial profiling—issues that teenagers in this country are reading about or personally dealing with every day. The book tells the story of Starr, a black teenage girl, as she witnesses the killing of an unarmed Black teen (her friend, Khalil) at the hands of a White police officer and follows Starr through the complicated and terrifying weeks that follow. The progression of events, from the initial outcry for justice to the inevitable demonizing of the victim, follows a pattern that teens today have seen played out again and again in the news and in their communities.

“I’ve seen it happen over and over again: a black person gets killed just for being black, and all hell breaks loose. I’ve Tweeted RIP hashtags, reblogged pictures on Tumblr, and signed every petition out there. I always said that if I saw it happen to somebody, I would have the loudest voice, making sure the world knew what went down.

Now I am that person, and I’m too afraid to speak.” (34-35, Thomas)

Starr’s words give a realistic teenage voice to this common narrative—especially as she tries to process the trauma she has experienced and its impact on her community while also dealing with the normal teenage dramas associated with school, family, romance, and friendships—which I think will allow teens to relate to her story and to the voices of the teens around her. I think that many teens will see themselves in Starr as she struggles to find balance between the two drastically different worlds in which she lives and to make her voice heard when she has a story that needs to be shared. Other teens might see themselves in Starr’s friends from school as they struggle to understand how the police they have always been taught to trust could be the target of such incredible anger from part of their community. Some teens might even see themselves in Khalil, the victim of violence and racial profiling whose voice is unheard until his community rises up to speak for him and tell his story.

“People like us in situations like this become hashtags, but they rarely get justice. I think we all wait for that one time though, that one time when it ends right.” (59, Thomas)

Starr’s voice is constantly being drowned out by the voices of the people around her, first as she tries to stay invisible as both her black-dominated community and her white-dominated school are whipped into a frenzy of speculation and anger and then later as she comes forward as the sole witness and tells her story. Many teenagers that I have spoken to talk about how no one is interested in hearing what they have to say and that even when they are able to speak up, their voice is discounted because they are “too young”, and I think that they will relate to Starr’s struggle to make her voice heard above the noise around her and against the objections of those who say that her voice is less important because she is a teenager. There is a moment near the end of the book where the Black community and their allies are protesting in the streets following the grand jury’s decision not to indict the cop who shot Khalil, demanding justice, as the police push back and try to regain control. Starr climbs on top of a car, megaphone in hand, and demands that the world hear her as she proclaims Khalil’s humanity to the crowd and forces them to listen to her story.

“What's the point of having a voice if you're gonna be silent in those moments you shouldn't be?” (252, Thomas)

**Introducing the Unit**

Before reading *The Hate U Give*, students should be introduced to the book’s main themes. In this unit, I will accomplish that by the following activities.

1. Have students create three lists in their writing journals: injustices they have experienced in their own lives, injustices that they have seen in their own communities, and injustices they see in the world. Remind them that items that appear on one of their lists might be on a different list for someone else. Discuss how, if applicable, people are speaking up and fighting each injustice.

2. Play a few songs about injustice/speaking up. Suggestions: “Keep Ya Head Up” by Tupac, “Changes” by Tupac, “Where Is the Love?” by the Black Eyed Peas, “Ohio” by Neil Young, “Make It Stop” by Rise Against, and “Same Love” by Macklemore & Ryan Lewis. Have students listen to lyrics, writing down words/phrases that stand out to them. Have students pick one of the songs to write a short response to, focusing on the lines they noted in their journals.

Soldiers are cutting us down

Should have been done long ago

What if you knew her

And found her dead on the ground

How can you run when you know?

(“Ohio”, Neil Young)

But if you only have love for your own race

Then you only leave space to discriminate

And to discriminate only generates hate

And when you hate, then you’re bound to get irate

(“Where Is The Love?”, Black Eyed Peas)

3. Read and discuss the following poems:

**Caged Bird**

**BY MAYA ANGELOU**

A free bird leaps

on the back of the wind

and floats downstream

till the current ends

and dips his wing

in the orange sun rays

and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks

down his narrow cage

can seldom see through

his bars of rage

his wings are clipped and

his feet are tied

so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings

with a fearful trill

of things unknown

but longed for still

and his tune is heard

on the distant hill

for the caged bird

sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze

and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees

and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn

and he names the sky his own

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams

his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream

his wings are clipped and his feet are tied

so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings

with a fearful trill

of things unknown

but longed for still

and his tune is heard

on the distant hill

for the caged bird

sings of freedom.

**Riot**

**BY GWENDOLYN BROOKS**

A riot is the language of the unheard.

—martin luther king

John Cabot, out of Wilma, once a Wycliffe,

all whitebluerose below his golden hair,

wrapped richly in right linen and right wool,

almost forgot his Jaguar and Lake Bluff;

almost forgot Grandtully (which is The

Best Thing That Ever Happened To Scotch); almost

forgot the sculpture at the Richard Gray

and Distelheim; the kidney pie at Maxim’s,

the Grenadine de Boeuf at Maison Henri.

Because the Negroes were coming down the street.

Because the Poor were sweaty and unpretty

(not like Two Dainty Negroes in Winnetka)

and they were coming toward him in rough ranks.

In seas. In windsweep. They were black and loud.

And not detainable. And not discreet.

Gross. Gross. “Que tu es grossier!” John Cabot

itched instantly beneath the nourished white

that told his story of glory to the World.

“Don’t let It touch me! the blackness! Lord!” he whispered

to any handy angel in the sky.

But, in a thrilling announcement, on It drove

and breathed on him: and touched him. In that breath

the fume of pig foot, chitterling and cheap chili,

malign, mocked John. And, in terrific touch, old

averted doubt jerked forward decently,

cried, “Cabot! John! You are a desperate man,

and the desperate die expensively today.”

John Cabot went down in the smoke and fire

and broken glass and blood, and he cried “Lord!

Forgive these nigguhs that know not what they do.”

**Ghazal, After Ferguson**

**BY YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA**

Somebody go & ask Biggie to orate

what's going down in the streets.

No, an attitude is not a suicide note

written on walls around the streets.

Twitter stays lockstep in the frontal lobe

as we hope for a bypass beyond the streets,

but only each day bears witness

in the echo chamber of the streets.

Grandmaster Flash's thunderclap says

he's not the grand jury in the streets,

says he doesn't care if you're big or small

fear can kill a man on the streets.

Take back the night. Take killjoy's

cameras & microphones to the streets.

If you're holding the hand lightning strikes

juice will light you up miles from the streets

where an electric chair surge dims

all the county lights beyond the streets.

Who will go out there & speak laws

of motion & relativity in the streets?

Yusef, this morning proves a crow

the only truth serum in the street.

**where our protest sound**

**BY LENELLE MOÏSE**

jazz is underwater

vodou atlantis mute

aborted ultrasound

fetal fish in flood

haiti's first cousin

forcibly kissed

by a hurricane called

katrina. hot winds

come one fat

tuesday.

old levee leak

explodes. fixing funds gone

to homeland

security. soldiers

stationed in iraq. said,

jazz is underwater

days like laissez-faire

manna does not fall

saviors do not save

hunger prays to rage for

resilience, improvisational genius

implodes, anarchy duets

with despair.

bassist fingers loot—nimble

like a deft pianist. said, vodou

atlantis mute. the fragile

eardrums of instant orphans get

inundated with someone else's mama's

soprano saxophone screams.

(meanwhile televised tenor

voices report monotonous

drone to drown out)

the deafening beat

of funeral marchers

can't swim.

bloated trumpet

carcasses, a singer swallows human

sewage. her last note, a curse

on america. aborted

ultrasound. cacophonous

warnings scatter brains.

pedestrians hear calls to

evacuate, escape, and think, how

fast can on-foot run? the poor, the weary

just drown. abandoned elders

just drown. people

in wheelchairs just drown. the sick

in bed cannot leave. their doctors stay

behind too. new emergencies engulf

the e.r. swamped hospitals ain't

hostels, ain't shelters.

resources slim

like hope. nurses stay

behind too. their loyal partners

will not leave. ill-fated

rejects just drown. said, fetal fish

in flood. outside, a breaking

willow weeps like a father

on his rooftop, murmuring

his wife's last words: clutch tight

to our babies and let me

die, she had pleaded, you can't

hold on to us all, let me die.

she, too, like jazz, is

underwater. her love,

her certainty, will

haunt him. their children's

survival, a scar. sanity also

loses its grip, guilt-weight

like cold, wet clothes.

eighty percent of new orleans

submerged. debris lingers, disease

looms. said, days like laissez-faire.

manna does not fall. shock battles

suicide thoughts.

some thirsty throats cope,

manage dirges in cajun, in zydeco.

out-of-state kin can't

get through.

refugees (refugees?) remember

ruined homes.

a preacher remembers the book

of revelations. still saviors

wait to save.

and the living wade with the countless

dead while

a wealthy president flies

overhead

up where brown people look

up where

brown people look like

spoiled jambalaya, stewing

from a distance

in their down-there

distress, said,

he's free—

high up—far up—

vacation fresh—eagle up, up

and away

from the place

where our protest

sound started, still

sings. american music

gurgling cyclone litanies

man cannot prevent, the man

cannot hear.

4. Possible writing prompts for journals:

a. Describe a time when you witnessed injustice. Did anyone speak up? If you could go back, would you do anything differently?

b. Pick one of the songs or poems we discussed in class and relate it to your own ideas about injustice.

c. Write your own poem about injustice

**Reading *The Hate U Give***

Since *The Hate U Give* is a full-length novel, students will be assigned sections of approximately 30-40 pages to reach between each class. Each class period will start with a check of their understanding of the required reading—either a short quiz, a discussion where students are randomly chosen to share one key insight, quote, or theme they identified in the text, or a 5-10 minute written response to the reading. We will also spend time in class going over the text and discussing references to historical events, pop culture, or current events, since the book uses these references frequently and it is important for students to understand the context of these references. Each class period will also include a 10-15 minute silent writing exercise on prompts related to the reading, the relevant references, and the students’ own experiences. The unit will conclude with the movie version of *The Hate U Give*.

This unit will include several projects to expand the students’ understanding and encourage them to think beyond the text. These will include:

1. Read an outside-of-class book with themes of justice/injustice (if taught in AP English Lit, use books from canonical YA literature list). Students will have the opportunity to participate in a Book Pass activity, where I will circulate copies of the books from both lists for students to spend a few minutes looking at, then they will pass their book to the next person and receive a new book to review. This will allow students to see all of the book options and form an idea of which books they would like to read. Students will write an essay comparing their chosen book and *The Hate U Give*, focusing on one particular theme or idea. For example, a student might write about teenagers speaking out against a corrupt system after reading *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* and compare Harry and Hermione’s fight to save Sirius and Buckbeak to Starr’s struggle to bring Khalil’s killer to justice. Students will chose from approximately 30 books, including:

*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* by J. K. Rowling: The third book in the *Harry Potter* series, this installment focuses on the recently escaped Death Eater, Sirius Black, and his apparent quest for revenge on Harry for defeating Voldemort. Harry discovers that even Hogwarts and his friends cannot keep him safe from the traitor hiding in their midst and learns that things aren’t always what they seem.

*Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson: Melinda is the new school outcast because she called the cops after a party. She becomes more and more isolated as time passes before she finally stops speaking altogether, and it is only through her art class that she is able to confront the horrors that happened the night of the party when she was raped by a popular guy from her school. When she is attacked again by the same student, she refuses to be silent, and she is able to tell her story and make her classmates understand what really happened that night.

*All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely: 16-year-old Rashad is mistaken for a shoplifter and beaten by a white cop, and the only witnesses are Paul’s foster son, Quinn, and a surveillance camera. As word spreads across the town, people begin to take sides and before long, the entire town is ready to erupt.

*Monster* by Walter Dean Myers: Presented as a screenplay, *Monster* tells the story of Steve, a teenage boy in juvenile detention as he goes through the trial process. Steve begins to write his autobiographical screenplay as a way to cope with the horrors that he experiences, but despite his efforts, his reality begins to blur and he can no longer see his own identity or the truth about what happened.

*Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison: The nameless author in this novel describes his childhood in a black community in the South, his short time at a Black college before he is expelled, his time in New York where he becomes a spokesman for “the Brotherhood”, and his eventual retreat into his basement amidst the violence and confusion that surrounds him. The unnamed narrator struggles to find his voice as a Black man, but ends up a sad tale of despair, hiding from the world in a basement.

*Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky: Considered the first great novel of Dostoevsky’s “mature” period of writing, the novel focuses on the tormenting guilt felt by Raskolnikov, an impoverished former student, following his murder of an old woman and her sister for their money. When planning the crime, he believed that the money he could steal would lift him out of poverty and allow him to achieve greatness, but afterward he is sunk in despair and confusion as he confronts the real consequences of his crime.

*To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee: Told from the perspective of a young girl, Scout, as her father risks everything to defend a Black man accused of a crime he didn’t commit, *To Kill A Mockingbird* is a coming of age story that is riddled with injustice, prejudice, and yes, beauty.

*Witness* by Karen Hesse: Written as a lyrical play, *Witness* tells the story of a small town in 1924 as it turns against itself when the KKK comes to stay. The story is told through the many voices of the town’s inhabitants as they struggle to hold their town together as hatred threatens to destroy them, and their voices bear witness to the events that lead them to the brink.

2. A creative response to an injustice in their own life/in the world that they want to speak up about. Students will chose a particular injustice to focus on and speak up about, and then they will chose 1 creative options from each of the following lists (one visual and one written/spoken):

a. a drawing/painting, a picture collage from newspapers/magazines/etc., a photography series, a comic strip

b. a song, a poem, a short story

If students have other ideas of how they want to express themselves, I will be open to other ideas.

3. In-class protest. Students will identify an injustice (either the one from their creative response or a different one), create a protest sign, and display them in class. Students will present their sign to the class and explain why they chose the issue that they chose and why they created the sign that they did. At the end of class, we will take class pictures of all the students with their signs to put on the wall of the classroom.

4. Final exam. At the end of the unit, students will take a final exam that will include short answer questions and an essay.

**Concluding the Unit**

At the conclusion of the unit, students should have a good understanding of the current and historical events that provide context and inspiration for *The Hate You Give*, and they should be able to express their own ideas about the struggle for justice in both the book and their own lives, communities, and the world. I want my students to feel empowered to speak up when they see something that doesn’t feel right, whether it is a classmate being bullied or an entire population being oppressed. *The Hate U Give* is a book that gives a teenage voice to critical current events while exploring issues that teens can relate to their own lives, and I hope that this unit will help my students find their own voice.

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