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Unit of Study: Censorship, Dystopia, and Everything in Between

**I. Rationale**

The dystopian genre has always been popular—dating as far back as the 19th century—and has only grown in relevance beginning around the time of the publication of *The Hunger Games*, which ushered in a new era of young adult dystopian fiction: *Divergent*, *The Maze Runner*, etc. Dystopia is officially defined as “an imagined state or society in which there is great suffering or injustice, typically one that is totalitarian or post-apocalyptic” and young adult dystopian literature often features a main character who rises up against the system put in place by powers that be long before they’ve even existed. The works demonstrate that systems can always be torn down, and show empowered individuals who survive the misdeeds and misgivings of the setting the genre puts them in—both are important takeaways to impart upon young adults. Even though most literature within the dystopian genre are intermingled with fantasy, the stories they tell are still relevant and realistic as they still tackle issues that are shown in day to day life, and can offer an easier lens to view the world through it.

The portrayal of real life issues, however, leads to censorship. In a world where freedom of speech is meant to be a basic human right, censorship within the stratosphere of books is far too prevalent for reasons far too arbitrary. The common reasons for censorship are cited to be violence, profanity, sexual activity, etc that are guised under “thinking of the children” to preserve their innocence. However, censorship of books—especially dystopian ones—only leads to further stigmatizing real life issues. Examples include but are not limited to *The Handmaid’s*

*Tale* which was banned for profanity and sexual overtones, but is a story that explores the consequences of complacency; *To Kill a Mockingbird* which was banned for profanity and undermining race relations, but is a story that challenges the morality of bias and racism; *Speak* which was banned for profanity and bias against male students, but is a story about working through the trauma of rape. All of these (and more) are important stories for young adults, banned for a flippant reason to censor the more glaring one. As students work through the unit, they will grapple with the morality of censorship and how banning books fit into the in-world context of events.

Students will be given a variety of centerpieces to choose from: George Orwell's *1984*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*—all of which are dystopian books that have been banned at one point or another. All of these works are suited for 10th-12th graders, but are best suited for 12th graders due to the heavier and more mature topics of the novels. Allowing students to make their own selection will offer them some autonomy and power to pursue what story they choose, both of which are important aspects in any dystopian novel. (I chose not to include Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* as a centerpiece even though it's a dystopian book about banned books that has been previously banned because it, quite frankly, is too straightforward to the meaning of the unit.)

## **II. Introducing the Unit**

To start the unit, students will be a part of an in-class discussion about what 'dystopian' means before being prompted to provide examples of dystopian works. This will then segue into the topic of censorship, which is a very dystopian concept in and of itself. Students will be given a few examples of banned books (*Lorax*, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, *Twelfth Night*) alongside the

reasons why (criminalizes the forest industry, teen suicide, crossdressing) before turning to their seat partners to discuss a list of books they think have been banned. Afterwards, the students will share their list and discuss the banned books as a class.

This opening activity will help ease students into the meat of the unit by giving them a taste of what it's about before fully diving into it. It will foster conversation around the morality of the concept of banning books as they try to figure out where to toe the line between what should be censored and what shouldn't be, or if there should be any censorship at all.

Following this, students will be shown a slides deck of the offered novel choices for the unit that shows the cover, summary, possible warnings, and notes about readability or language if it is deemed necessary. The slides deck will help narrow and define the students' choice for the unit. As the school library prepares for their class copy, students will continue to delve into what shapes the dystopian genre (tropes) and how censorship is closely related to it.

As the unit progresses, students will be prompted every so often to answer a journal question pertaining to the happenings of the unit that will be collected for completion soon after. The prompted questions would be as followed:

- List all the reasons why The Bible might have been banned. (Feel free to get creative!)
- If you had to ban one book, what would it be and why?
- Has your novel reminded you of any real-life experiences?
- What elements of dystopian fiction were emphasized in your novel?
- If you could see your novel in any other POV, what would it be and why?

### III. Working Through the Text:

After students have selected their novel of choice, they will be separated into book groups accordingly. Due to this, students must do the reading on their own time so that they may come into class ready to discuss the latest reading with their classmates. Before discussion within their respective groups, they will be allotted time to fill out a Reader Response Journal. An example can be seen as followed:

Summary—list important events, highlights new characters introduced	[answer]
Two Discussion Questions—questions that will generate conversation and encourage different points of views and ideas	[answer]
Reflection	[answer]

The Reader Response Journal will help foster well thought out discussion and help students feel more prepared before delving into the novel with their peers.

At the complete end of the reading, each book group will have a more tailored set of questions to answer that focuses on the novel of choice. They will additionally be asked to break down the novel as a group into tropes, boiling characters down into simple sentences, and

presenting them to the class. (Presentations will be short and should average around only 5 minutes each as they are mainly meant to demonstrate the students' understanding of the text.)

#### **IV. Going Beyond the Text**

Though dystopian novels are often rooted in fictitious settings, the stories and issues it explores are undoubtedly real. Even from a young age, systems permeate life constantly—the government, school, religious institutions, etc—and they're often seen as something that has stood to the test of time and should stay in place; dystopian settings are built on fear of striking out from the norm, and that sentiment often leaks into real life where those that do not follow the status quo are ostracized and cast out. Even books follow this sentiment, where something bigger at play acts as judge, jury, executioner for banning books. Banning books in and of itself is a very dystopian concept—to restrict knowledge because it doesn't fit the ideal writing, or that it's "too real". Who is in charge of censorship? What gives them the authority to do so? These are important questions that young adults need to answer.

#### YA:

1. *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury: Guy Montag is a fireman. His job is to destroy the most illegal of commodities, the printed book, along with the houses in which they are hidden. Montag never questions the destruction and ruin his actions produce, returning each day to his bland life and wife, Mildred, who spends all day with her television "family." But when he meets an eccentric young neighbor, Clarisse, who introduces him to a past where people didn't live in fear and to a present where one sees the world

through the ideas in books instead of the mindless chatter of television, Montag begins to question everything he has ever known. (Summary taken from Goodreads)

- a. Banned for “discussion of being drunk, smoking cigarettes, violence, ‘dirty talk’, references to the Bible, and using God’s name in vain” (Banned Books 2018 – Fahrenheit 451”).

2. *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee: A novel about a girl nicknamed “Scout” Finch and her family, their life in a small, rural town of Maycomb in Alabama, where racism and segregation are at large. Lee’s work is famous all around the world, among both young and older readers; the storyline of a novel is compelling as it talks about the never-ending story of prejudice and hatred in human world. (Summary taken from Goodreads)

- a. Banned because it was “considered "dangerous" because of profanity and undermining of race relations” (“Libguides”).

3. *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding: At the dawn of the next world war, a plane crashes on an uncharted island, stranding a group of schoolboys. At first, with no adult supervision, their freedom is something to celebrate; this far from civilization the boys can do anything they want. Anything. They attempt to forge their own society, failing, however, in the face of terror, sin and evil. And as order collapses, as strange howls echo in the night, as terror begins its reign, the hope of adventure seems as far from reality as the hope of being rescued. (Summary taken from Goodreads)

- a. Banned for “excessive violence and bad language” (“Libguides”).

4. *Animal Farm* by George Orwell: A farm is taken over by its overworked, mistreated animals. With flaming idealism and stirring slogans, they set out to create a paradise of

progress, justice, and equality. Thus the stage is set for one of the most telling satiric fables ever penned –a razor-edged fairy tale for grown-ups that records the evolution from revolution against tyranny to a totalitarianism just as terrible. (Summary taken from Goodreads)

- a. Banned because it “was seen as being critical of all forms of socialism, rather than specifically Stalinist communism” (Council).

5. *The Giver* by Lois Lowry: At the age of twelve, Jonas, a young boy from a seemingly utopian, futuristic world, is singled out to receive special training from The Giver, who alone holds the memories of the true joys and pain of life. (Summary taken from Goodreads)

- a. Banned because “parents complained that violent and sexual passages were inappropriate for children” (“Libguides”).

6. *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline: In the year 2044, reality is an ugly place. The only time teenage Wade Watts really feels alive is when he's jacked into the virtual utopia known as the OASIS. Wade's devoted his life to studying the puzzles hidden within this world's digital confines, puzzles that are based on their creator's obsession with the pop culture of decades past and that promise massive power and fortune to whoever can unlock them. (Summary taken from Goodreads)

- a. Banned for “mentioning prostitution, drugs and using profane language” (Goñi-Lissan and Walker).

Non-Dystopian:

7. *Harry Potter* by J.K. Rowling: Story of Harry Potter as he enters the new realm of magic with death quickly following his heels as he unravels the plot for his demise while trying to balance his home life and school life and everything in between.
  - a. Banned because of "satanism and anti-family themes" (Chiesa, et al.).
8. *Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher: A group of misfits brought together by TJ Jones struggle to find their places in a school that has no place for them.
  - a. Banned because "the book uses racial slurs and profanity" (Banned Books 2008 – Whale Talk").
9. *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson: This novel follows the story of Melinda after she undergoes a traumatic experience with no one by her side. Her journey throughout her first year of high school showcases her reclaiming of power through her voice.
  - a. Banned because "it was thought to contain a political viewpoint and it was claimed to be biased against male students, and for the novel's inclusion of rape and profanity" ("Libguides").

YA/Classics Pairs:

1. *Speak/The Handmaid's Tale*
  - a. Female main characters—one who rises above the grain, and one who gives into complacency (juxtaposition).
  - b. Both censored due to profanity and inclusion of the topic of rape.
2. *Fahrenheit 451/The Book Thief*
  - a. Both include a strong theme of censorship in books.



## V. Ending the Unit

By the end of the unit, students should have a more concrete understanding and grapple on where they stand on censorship of books. To finish, I would assign two different essay prompts they may be permitted to choose from: the first being a focused novel-related essay, and the second relating more to do with the censorship of books.

1. In the novel you have selected, it portrays a dystopian society with unique forms of oppression, control, and societal manipulation. Write about the methods and means of control utilized in your novel, exploring how these systems maintain power, manipulate individuals, and suppress freedom. Discuss the implications of said themes in the context of modern society and the potential warnings these novels may offer about the dangers of unchecked authority and the erosion of personal freedom.
  - a. For *The Handmaid's Tale*, think about the Republic of Gilead and how they enforced control over not just women's bodies, but also their minds. How is this still prevalent today?
  - b. For *1984*, think about the ways in which the Party's surveillance, Newspeak, and the manipulation of truth shapes the lives of individuals in the book. How does the implications of these control tactics in personal freedom relate to today?
  - c. For *Brave New World*, think about how the setting prioritizes happiness over truth and how that contributes to the establishment and maintenance of control. How does this bode with individual autonomy and the concept of happiness, and how do we see those concepts today?

2. Now that you have a better understanding of the censorship within books, write about whether or not books should be banned, and (if so) where do you draw the line? Should there be complete freedom in publication, or does there need to be regulations and restrictions? If so, who mandates those rules and why?

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