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ENGL 112B Literature for Young Adults

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### **Rational:**

America is often said to be the greatest country on Earth. For such a young nation, we have certainly left our mark on the world, figuratively and literally. The way America is spoken of, you would think that we are the greatest nation to exist and have ever existed, and yet, no nation has ever existed that has not gone through its ‘dark times.’ Looking at America today, it's no wonder we are not living through some of those dark times. Quotes from every era speak of the importance of justice. Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher in 500 B.C., said, “If it were not for injustice, man would not know justice.” (Heraclitus) he is not alone when speaking of justice. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” (Martin Luther King). Lillian Hellman stated something that best exemplifies where we stand as a nation now: “Since when have you had to agree with people to defend them from injustice?” Justice is a concept that should apply to everyone, everywhere, equally, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.

Despite this lofty concept, injustice prevails everywhere. The legal system punishes people unequally. Laws preferentially benefit the wealthy. People have justice denied to them. In modern American culture, we see it daily on the news, on social media, and in our communities. A person would be hard-pressed to go on to one of the previous mechanisms and not find a perceived injustice. Young adults undoubtedly feel this more than perhaps any other group.

Societal and legal protections should give them an umbrella of safety and security at their age. Yet young adults are exploited in almost every sense. It is by no means an issue of totality but rather individuals and small communities spread out across the nation. Yet even one is too many, as there can be no justification for anyone of any group to be victimized.

The unit of study that I wish to introduce would build on a student's understanding of justice and what constitutes injustice. The unit's novels, film clips, and practical exercises will focus on real-life events instead of theoretical or hypothetical models. Additionally, the scope of representation is broad but is not limited to those selections made in the unit, but rather focuses on specific examples of what is an injustice or an example of when justice is received. To that end, special consideration was made to ensure the representation of as many diverse groups as possible, but naturally, not all groups could be included. However, the unit is designed to be modular so that selections can be “Plug and Play” to better demonstrate concepts and practices for better clarity and understanding. This would also serve to make the unit more relatable to the given audience but not at the expense of compromising the unit's integrity.

The centerpiece for this unit of study is the canonical text, *Twelve Angry Men* by Reginald Rose. This fictional novel about a jury deliberating over a case in which a young boy is accused of murder deals with prejudice and bias and demonstrates how one person's logical and reasoned approach to the examination of the evidence can override the emotional bias and prejudice of the other jurors, that eventually allows justice to prevail. In addition to the novel, a full-stage play and numerous film adaptations have been produced, which would allow students to view critical portions of the text in a live-action format to reinforce concepts. Young adults reading this text and viewing portions of the play/movie will show how justice works “on the back end” with a jury and how individuals can be subject to personal bias, prejudice, and even racist beliefs even

when they are supposed to be operating in an objective capacity, furthermore, showing the lone jurors reason and logic to look at fact-based evidence and displaying that to the rest of the jurors demonstrates how our legal system can allow justice to prevail.

### **Introducing the Unit:**

At the beginning of the unit, students will be given a journal notebook. In the initial entry, they will be asked to write a response to a short prompt. “What do they know/or think **justice** is? Can you give an example/s?” Additionally, they will be asked, “What do they think is **injustice**, and could they provide an example of injustice or unjust behaviors/laws, or practices at play in the world today.” The purpose of this is not to debate or have an ‘I got you’ moment, nor is it to correct misconceptions, but rather to openly gauge each student's conceptual understanding of **justice/injustice**. After the writing prompt, the teacher will provide the definition of **Justice** and **Injustice** as key vocabulary words.

After students have had a chance to record their initial thoughts, a turn-based discussion between students/teachers takes place. Small groups of four students (give or take depending on class size) will have a chance to share with each other an example of both **Justice** and **Injustice**. The teacher will walk amongst the groups, facilitating and encouraging student participation and providing feedback to further their discussion/understanding. The groups will then arrive at a consensus of what they would rank as their number one choice and least important choice of each concept or, if so, decide whether or not some or all are evenly rated. This would potentially give four examples of justice and four of injustice ranked/unranked in a hierarchical order. Student groups would then share what they have collectively decided as a group and what they have discussed with the other groups. Students will hear how and what other groups decided was

important in their eyes as forms of **Just** and **Unjust** practices. **Just** and **Unjust** would be defined as key vocabulary terms at this time. The four terms, **Justice**, **Injustice**, **Just**, and **Unjust**, provide the students with the initial framework to understand events and actions that take place in the readings and activities they will take part in.

The purpose of this is to serve two functions. First, students and teachers are exposed to what the concepts mean to each student within the groups and amongst the other groups, showing differing or shared perspectives. Additionally, this would introduce the students to a process similar to a jury in which facts are weighed and measured, and a final decision is rendered. Students can be asked why they felt it was important and how they collectively arrived at the decisions that they made. Afterward, students will be asked to respond to the prompt in their journals. “After the in-class activity, has your understanding of what is **Just** and **Unjust** changed? If so, how? If not, please explain why.”

### **Working Through the Text:**

At this time, the text *Twelve Angry Men* would be introduced. Because *Twelve Angry Men* is a short novel, it can be done quickly. Each group (depending on class size and number of groups) will be assigned the part of jurors to read aloud in class, with the teacher narrating the text. The goal would be to allow for participation amongst all class members strengthening reading skills as well as speaking skills. We would read Act 1 in two parts and Act 2 in two parts over the course of one day each. After each reading session, students will be asked what stood out to them in a voluntary verbal open classroom discussion. Students would then be asked to record their thoughts and any additional insights or ideas in their journals. Journals would be turned in at the end of the Monday-Thursday week for review by the teacher. Feedback would be

provided on each journal to strengthen the students' writing as well as their understanding of concepts.

After reading the novel openly in class over the course of the week, (depending on availability of media), either the play or the movie will be shown in class. Students will then be asked to write short answers to the following questions; “How has your understanding of justice/injustice changed based on reading the novel versus seeing the play/movie? Are there any differences that stood out? What was the most impactful moment in the novel and why? What was the most impactful scene in the play/movie and why?” Students would be evaluated on their ability to tie concepts to specific moments within the text/play/movie or clearly articulate why the scene/portion of the text was a critical moment.

Every other Friday, students would take home their journals. They would then be asked to respond to the following prompt. “Select a story from the news (Television, print, or social media), and provide the name of the story/article and the names of the key people involved (For teacher review). Explain why this is an act of **justice** or an act of **injustice** and why.” Students will be required to alternate between **just** and **unjust** concepts bi-weekly. On weeks when students do not take home their journals, they will be asked to reflect on their assignments from the previous week. They will be asked to write in class on the following prompt; “Based on your work from the previous week, do you see examples of any group, religion, race, ethnicity, gender, orientation, or any other social class being that is or could be affected by this story?” After writing the prompt students will be asked to share with the class what they have learned. Classroom discussion will follow. The purpose of this prompt is to demonstrate an understanding of the critical concepts but also to demonstrate that justice is not limited to any one group over another.

Due in part to *Twelve Angry Men* being such a short piece of literature, I would like to introduce a second piece of literature titled *The Hate You Give* by Angie Thomas. While *Twelve Angry Men* delves into the concept of **Justice** after an arrest and during the course of a trial, *The Hate You Give* deals more with events prior to the commission of an act, how institutions designed to facilitate justice can openly serve to deny it, and issues of prejudice and racism, all centered around a young adult female character. The juxtaposition between her standard of living due to her poor socioeconomic status contrasts sharply with the wealthy suburban school she attends. Furthermore, aspects of discrimination, **social justice**, racial inequality, corruption, class discrimination, and more are all present within the text. **Social Justice** would be defined as a key concept. (Introduces Social Justice as a concept). This would introduce the concept of **Justice** outside the confines of the courtroom but still involving the legal system/process.

The chapters for this text are short, allowing for a model of learning that is identical to that used in *Twelve Angry Men*. The original groups would be retained, and turn-based reading would occur within the class, reading two chapters daily. Students would be asked to discuss one or more of the following prompts within their small groups (with the teacher facilitating and monitoring). What elements stood out to each student? What were they unclear on? Did they spot any instances of **injustice** or **justice**? Are there any elements of **social justice** at play? Is there any limitation that **justice** has over **social justice**? Students would then be asked to record their thoughts and answers to the prompt in their journals at the end of the discussion.

### **Going Beyond the Text:**

The concept of justice is both vast in scope and complex to analyze fully. Different facets of justice and what it means to be just can add further complexity to the topic. Furthermore,

contextualizing the contrary is equally vast and complex. Many novels from both the contemporary and the young adult literature dramas display a majority of the Exeter Qualities. Finding a text that would encapsulate them all would be difficult but not impossible. For the purposes of this unit of study, however, many of the novels deal with real-life experiences, facing death and loss, books that deal with identity, and lastly, discrimination and struggles with decisions. (Warner). Because this unit of study asks students not only what they understand various aspects of justice to be but also to seek out examples outside of the literary world and in their everyday lives, other pieces of literature can help to demonstrate these practices from a wider perspective. With that wider perspective, students will see that justice is not limited to one group or another but affects everyone equally from every social class, religious practice, race and nationality, sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity, and beyond. A mix of novels and graphic novels has been included for further and greater understanding and relatability.

### **Young Adult Literature:**

1. *This Is My America*, by Kim Johnson:

Every week, seventeen-year-old Tracy Beaumont writes letters to Innocence X, asking the organization to help her father, an innocent Black man on death row. After seven years, Tracy is running out of time—her dad has only 267 days left. Then, the unthinkable happens. The police arrive in the night, and Tracy’s older brother, Jamal, goes from being a bright, promising track star to a “thug” on the run, accused of killing a white girl. Determined to save her brother, Tracy investigates what happened between Jamal and Angela at the Pike. But will Tracy and her family survive the uncovering of the

skeletons of their Texas town's racist history that still haunt the present? (Summary taken from Goodreads).

2. *Watch Us Rise*, by Renne Watson:

Jasmine and Chelsea are sick of how women are treated even at their progressive NYC high school, so they decide to start a Women's Rights Club. They post everything online—poems, essays, videos of Chelsea performing her poetry, and Jasmine's response to the racial microaggressions she experiences—and soon they go viral. But with such positive support, online trolls also target the club. When things escalate, the principal shuts the club down. Jasmine and Chelsea will risk everything for their voices—and those of other young women—to be heard. (Summary taken from Goodreads).

3. *Internment*, by Samira Ahmed:

Rebellions are built on hope. Set in a horrifying near-future United States, seventeen-year-old Layla Amin, and her parents are forced into an internment camp for Muslim American citizens. With the help of newly made friends also trapped within the internment camp, her boyfriend on the outside, and an unexpected alliance, Layla begins a journey to fight for freedom, leading a revolution against the internment camp's Director and his guards. (Summary taken from Goodreads).

4. *Anger Is A Gift*, by Mark Oshiro:

Six years ago, Moss Jefferies' father was murdered by an Oakland police officer. Along with losing a parent, the media's vilification of his father and lack of accountability has left Moss with near-crippling panic attacks. Now, in his sophomore year of high school, Moss and his fellow classmates find themselves increasingly treated like criminals by their own school. New rules. Random locker searches. Constant intimidation and



Oakland Police Department stationed in their halls. Despite their youth, the students decide to organize and push back against the administration. This is the story of a diverse student body. There are gay characters, trans characters, non-binary characters, bisexual/biromantic characters, asexual characters, Black characters, Latinx characters, Muslim characters, undocumented characters, and characters with disabilities. When tensions hit a fever pitch and tragedy strikes, Moss must face a difficult choice: give in to fear and hate or realize that anger can actually be a gift. (Summary taken from Goodreads).

5. *A Little Piece Of Ground*, by Elizabeth Laird Bill Neal (Illustrator), Sonia Nimr: *A Little Piece Of Ground* explores the human cost of the occupation of Palestinian lands through the eyes of a young boy. Twelve-year-old Karim Aboudi and his family are trapped in their Ramallah home by a strict curfew. In response to a Palestinian suicide bombing, the Israeli military subjects the West Bank town to a virtual siege. Meanwhile, Karim, trapped at home with his teenage brother and fearful parents, longs to play football with his friends. When the curfew ends, he and his friend discover an unused patch of ground that's the perfect site for a football pitch. Nearby, an old car hidden intact under a bulldozed building makes a brilliant den. But there's a constant danger in this city, even for schoolboys. And when Israeli soldiers find Karim outside during the next curfew, it seems impossible that he will survive. This powerful book fills a substantial gap in existing young adult literature on the Middle East. (Summary taken from Goodreads).
6. *The Circuit*, by Fransico Jimenez: These independent but intertwined stories follow a migrant family through their circuit, from picking cotton and strawberries to topping carrots - and back again - over several years. As it moves from one labor camp to the

next, the little family of four grows into ten. Impermanence and poverty define their lives. But with faith, hope, and back-breaking work, the family endures. The rich and unique stories show a different perspective on the lives of children living in the United States. (Summary taken from Goodreads).

7. *Dear Justyce*, by Nic Stone: Shortly after teenager Quan enters a not-guilty plea for the shooting death of a police officer, he is placed in a holding cell to await trial. Through a series of flashbacks and letters to Justyce, the protagonist of *Dear Martin*, Quan's story unravels. From a troubled childhood and bad timing to a coerced confession and prejudiced police work, Nic Stone's newest novel takes an unflinching look at the flawed practices and ideologies that discriminate against African-American boys and minorities in the American justice system. (Summary taken from Goodreads).
8. *They Called Us Enemy*, by Geroge Takei: In 1942, at the order of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, every person of Japanese descent on the West Coast was rounded up and shipped to one of ten "relocation centers," hundreds or thousands of miles from home, where they would be held for years under armed guard. *They Called Us Enemy* is Takei's firsthand account of those years behind barbed wire, the joys and terrors of growing up under legalized racism, his mother's hard choices, his father's faith in democracy, and the way those experiences planted the seeds for his astonishing future. (Summary taken from Goodreads).
9. *Speak*, by Laurie Halse Anderson: From the first moment of her freshman year at Merryweather High, Melinda knows this is a big fat lie, part of the nonsense of high school. She is a friendless outcast because she busted an end-of-summer party by calling the cops, so now nobody will talk to her, let alone listen to her. As time passes, she

becomes increasingly isolated and practically stops talking altogether. Only her art class offers any solace, and it is through her work on an art project that she is finally able to face what really happened at that terrible party: she was raped by an upperclassman, a guy who still attends Merryweather and is still a threat to her. Her healing process has just begun when she has another violent encounter with him. But this time, Melinda fights back, refuses to be silent, and thereby achieves a measure of vindication. In Laurie Halse Anderson's powerful novel, an utterly believable heroine with a bitterly ironic voice delivers a blow to the hypocritical world of high school. She speaks for many disenfranchised teenagers while demonstrating the importance of speaking up for oneself. (Summary taken from Goodreads).

10. *We Are Not Free*, by Traci Chee: *We Are Not Free*, is the collective account of a tight-knit group of young Nisei, second-generation Japanese American citizens, whose lives are irrevocably changed by the mass U.S. incarcerations of World War II. Fourteen teens who have grown up together in Japantown, San Francisco. Fourteen teens form a community and a family, as interconnected as they are conflicted. Fourteen teens whose lives are turned upside down when over 100,000 people of Japanese ancestry are removed from their homes and forced into desolate incarceration camps. In a world that seems determined to hate them, these young Nisei must rally together as racism and injustice threaten to pull them apart. (Summary taken from Goodreads).

### **Other Young Adult Literature with Sub-topics:**

1. *The Assignment*, by Liza M. Wiemer.

Students in High School were asked by their favorite teacher to write a paper arguing for the Final Solution, which was the term that Nazi Germany used for the mass extermination of Jewish people.

2. *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters Vol. 1*, by Emil Ferris.

In a graphic novel set in 1960s Chicago, Karen Reyes attempts to solve the murder of her upstairs neighbor while trying to explore aspects of herself and her identity.

3. *My Name Is Not Easy*, by Debby Dahl Edwardson.

Luke and his brothers are sent from the Arctic village where they have lived their whole lives to a boarding school further south where Speaking Inupiaq -- or any native language -- is forbidden.

### **Contemporary Literature:**

1. *A Time To Kill*, by John Grisham.

Two drunken and remorseless young men shatter the life of a ten-year-old girl. The mostly white town reacts with shock and horror at the inhuman crime until her black father acquires an assault rifle and takes matters into his own hands. A defense attorney struggles to save the life of his client in a town that wants to see him put to death for the crime of wanting justice for his child.

2. *Erin Brockovich* by Donna Naggie.

Erin Brockovich tells the true story of how a down-and-out single mother working with a law firm uncovered one of the biggest environmental scandals in American history. As the story progresses, Erin faces the challenges of raising her kids while seeking justice for hundreds of people who had been knowingly poisoned by a major energy company's

negligent actions. Erin's determination to view the people not as names on a sheet but as natural persons helped ensure they got the justice they deserved.

3. *Hidden Figures* by Margot Lee Shetterly.

The novel is set amid the civil rights movement and is the never-before-told true story of NASA's African-American female mathematicians who played a crucial role in America's space program. Segregated from their white counterparts, these 'colored computers' used pencil and paper to write the equations that would launch rockets and astronauts into space. (Summary taken from Goodreads).

4. *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson.

*Just Mercy* tells the story of the Equal Justice Initiative, a nonprofit law office in Montgomery, Alabama, dedicated to defending the poor, the incarcerated, and the wrongly condemned from its earliest days, with a small staff facing the nation's highest death sentencing and execution rates through a successful campaign to challenge the cruel practice of sentencing children to die in prison. One of EJI's first clients was Walter McMillian, a young Black man who was sentenced to die for the murder of a young white woman that he didn't commit. The case exemplifies how the death penalty in America is a direct descendant of lynching — a system that treats the rich and guilty better than the poor and innocent. Stevenson's dogged determination in the face of death threats, police persecution, corruption, and personal struggles eventually leads to Walter's freedom but underscores the fact that many more remain incarcerated. (Summary taken from Goodreads).

5. *The Voting Booth*, by Brandy Colbert.

Duke Crenshaw is so done with this election. He wants to get voting over with to prepare for his band's first paying gig tonight. Only problem? Duke can't vote. When Marva sees Duke turned away from their polling place, she takes it upon herself to ensure his vote is counted. She hasn't spent months doorbelling and registering voters just to see someone denied their right. And that's how their whirlwind day begins, rushing from precinct to precinct, cutting school, waiting in endless lines, turning away repeatedly, trying to do one simple thing: vote. They may have started out as strangers, but as Duke and Marva team up to beat a rigged system (and find Marva's missing cat), it's clear that there's more to their connection than a shared mission for democracy. (Summary taken from Goodreads).

6. *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI* by David Gran. *Killers of the Flower Moon* tells the story of the Osage Native Americans and how they found oil on their reservation land. This oil made them wealthy based on the standards of the time, and all seemed to be going well until they mysteriously began to die off. Anyone investigating the crimes soon suffered a similar fate. Shootings, beating, and poisoning were all inflicted upon the native people in the name of greed. Eventually, the President formed the Federal Bureau of Investigations and tasked them with solving the murders that would uncover one of the most significant and sinister criminal conspiracies in American History. (Summary taken from Goodreads).

### **Classics:**

1. *Titus Andronicus* by William Shakespeare.

Features several depictions of class discrimination, racial bias, prejudice, and varying degrees of justice. Explores themes of what is considered justified and what is not.

2. *The Grapes Of Wrath* by John Steinbeck.

Depicts a family during the Dust Bowl Migrations that took place during the Great Depression, as they migrate to the West Coast searching for economic prosperity. The novel depicts class discrimination as well as economic exploitation and inequality.

3. *1984* by George Orwell.

A novel with a dystopian future in which the state's power is absolute, personal freedom and self-determination are banned, and to disobey means harsh and rapid punishments.

This novel features social and class-based discrimination.

4. *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood

The novel with a dystopian future depicts class and gender discrimination throughout.

### **Pairing Young Adult Literature with Classic or Contemporary Novels:**

1. *This Is My America/Just Mercy*

Contains themes centered around death and loss along with real-world experiences.

Racial bias, injustice, and corruption are also present throughout. Both novels deal with the structural inequality that is prevalent against African Americans within the legal system.

2. *Internment/Titus Andronicus*

Both stories contain depictions of rebellion brought on by racial discrimination. Both novels depict bias and racial discrimination throughout. Both stories confront the reader with what is considered just when injustice is present.

3. *Watch Us Rise/Hidden Figures*

Novels depict social, racial, and ethnic discrimination throughout. Both novels feature strong minority female leads who decide to push back against the 'status quo' and improve their circumstances by their own means.

4. *The Handmaid's Tale/Speak*

Novels depict class and gender discrimination. Novels also depict unequal justice when applied to gender or class.

### **Ending the Unit:**

At the conclusion of the unit, students should have a firm grasp of the concepts of justice, injustice, and social justice, along with what it means to be just and unjust. Students will have demonstrated this understanding through their journal and classroom discussion activities. Students will have a chance to showcase this knowledge through a project of their choice.

#### Project One:

Project One will involve the students individually selecting one of the previously identified injustices they had written from their journals. Students would then be responsible for identifying any other groups that are/or can be affected by the same issue. The students will then write a short paper (750-1000 words) in which they have:

1. Identified the issue and the harm it causes.
2. Determine who or what groups are/can be affected by it.
3. Suggest if there are solutions that could correct the issue.

#### Project Two:

Project Two is more involved than Project One. For this project, the students can work in



their small groups from the year. (Group of no more than four, and students can partner with members from other groups if they desire). Student groups will review the project and detail a list of agreed work before initiating the project. Students can choose from an injustice entry from their journals or an entirely new one. Only one entry will be required for the project. Students can choose to submit a paper presentation or develop a PowerPoint. Students in the small group must:

1. Identify an issue and what harm the issue causes.
2. Identify causes/possible causes for the issue.
3. Determine which groups are/can be affected by it.
4. Suggest if there are solutions that could correct the issue.
5. Working collaboratively, develop a plan for how they would implement their solution.

In addition to demonstrating understanding and proficiency with the terms and concepts, the goal for both assignments is for students to understand that they can be part of the solution and do not have to accept what they may feel are unjust systems/behaviors/or treatment. Both projects will have a total of seven classroom days to complete the project. The final three days of class will be reserved for presentations in which the students will present their work to the rest of the class. Students presenting individually will be graded based on their understanding of the material and how it was expressed following the format previously listed. Students presenting in a group will take turns presenting the portions of the project that they contributed to. Students will be graded on the collective work they contributed based on their understanding of the above criteria. Any additional time remaining after presentations will be given to a film that covers an aspect of justice that students will have previously had the opportunity to vote on.

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