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Understanding the Enemy Through History

Propaganda has been a part of world history ever since the printing press was invented. It serves its purpose of dehumanizing the “enemy” of a country and boosting patriotism. While this can be useful for uniting a nation under a singular cause, it can easily be used for ousting a specific group, such as the case with the Nazis and Jewish community during World War II. Because of this, this Unit of Study will focus on using historical fiction to help teach student about the many different “enemies” the United States has come across. The goal of this is to have students understand how these different groups formed and that not all members of the group were necessarily bad people. This idea is something important for a student to understand as it not only prevents history from repeating itself, but it allows students to understand that it is very easy to forget that even the “enemy” is human. This will be done through five key novels and various activities including a movie and propaganda. Young adult literature is a great tool for giving teenagers different perspectives, so the novels chosen all deal with perspectives from the many different groups such as the Nazis and KKK.

The cannon work for this unit will be George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, a creative journey through the rise of Communism in a post-World War I Russia. Communism founds itself the enemy of democracy mostly through the conflicts between the Soviet Union and United States. It was a time of great unrest between the two nations which culminated in the Cold War, possibly the scariest time to be a citizen of either country. While this may seem like ancient history now, this tension and unrest present between the United States and other countries is still relevant today through North Korea and groups in Middle East such as Isis. Because of this, a better understanding of communism (more specifically how it came to be and how it affected people) can provide great ground work for the idea of understanding how human the “enemy” is. This will lead into the other novels in which students will take a deeper dive into more specific examples how people’s lives were affected by these groups, whether it be a victim or a member. Because *Literature for Today’s Young Adults* describes a bad historical work as one that uses “Oversimplification of the historical issues arid a stereotyping of tile ‘bad’ and the ‘good’ guys” (Chapter 8, *LfTYA*), these novels have been chosen for their ability to show a grey area between good and bad.

Introducing the Subject

To introduce the subject, students will be introduced to various forms of propaganda from World War II. Specifically, it will be propaganda made by the United States against the Nazis and Japanese. Before being split into groups to tackle a specific propaganda poster, students will watch the two infamous Disney anti-Nazi and anti-Japan cartoons. It will not only be a bit of light-hearted fun (which the students can enjoy this topic ends on a much darker note), but show students how even a beloved character such as Daffy Duck was used for war propaganda. After splitting into groups, students will examine the propaganda posters they have been given and determine how exactly the poster represents the target group or how it tries to invoke a feeling of patriotism if applicable. After that, they will be asked to do a SSW in which they write down their reactions/thoughts to either the poster the examined or the cartoons they watched. After that students will jump straight into *Animal Farm*.

Resources

*Literature for Today’s Young Adults* states that a good historical novel has “Believable characters with whom young readers can identify “(Chapter 8, *LfTYA*). All resources gathered focus on the struggles of their characters and how they deal with either the oppression or the pressure to conform that they face. It would be best if these books were split up into book groups in which students read their assigned books and present the books to the rest of the class. The presentation would specifically focus on analysis of a single main character from the list given with each book. By doing this, students can understand the struggles of a variety of different characters. After this project, the unit will wrap up with the novel *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and its 2008 film adaptation.

*After the First Death* by Robert Comier

This novel deals with a group of terrorists hijacking a bus full of children. The terrorists claim that they are doing so to help free their homeland, although said country is never given a specific name. The novel focusses on the struggles of Miro (a young terrorist), Kate (the bus driver), and Ben (son of a general). Reading this novel will give students a great insight into the idea of patriotism and how it can create radical people such as Miro. Students don not have to necessarily sympathize with Miro, but they should understand his struggles and where he comes from. Students will be able to do a presentation on either Miro or Ben, as they are the two characters that patriotism affects the most.

*Witness* by Karen Hesse

*Witness* is a free-verse poetry book about a small town in Vermont that is slowly taken over by the Ku Klux Klan. The story has the different viewpoints of ten different characters and how he KKK affected their lives. For this particular work, students should focus on the characters who became directly involved with the KKK; meaning they should focus on Johnny Reeves, Merlin Van Tornhout, and Harvey Pettibone. While the KKK may not be as commonly seen in the same light as Nazis or Terrorists, they are still a group that promotes hate and is generally seen as nothing but evil. However, as is the focus of this Unit, students should come to understand how the KKK came to power and how members of it justified their actions.

*The Pianist* by Wladyslaw Szpilman

This memoir of the Jewish composer Wladyslaw Szpilman tells the story of how he survived Jewish deportation and the Warsaw Ghetto. The story takes place in Poland after Hitler rises to power in Germany. After Poland is invaded in 1939, Jewish citizens are deported to the Warsaw ghetto and eventually moved to the Umschalaplatz, a holding area for the eventual death camps. The story focuses specifically on Szpilman and his family, and how the Nazis changed their lives forever. Wladyslaw Szpilman makes a point to be somewhat grey about the different groups mentioned in this novel, meaning he viewed not all Germans and bad and not all of the oppressed as good. Because of this, students will focus primarily on Szpilman and how he views the Nazi and the Jewish communities he comes into contact with.

*The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* by John Boyne

*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas (2008 Film)* by Mark Herman

This will be the final piece that the class reads together. This novel will also be paired with the 2008 film adaptation. It should be noted that this will most likely be the most difficult story for teens to get through due to its subject matter. This novel focuses on the point of view of a nine year old child, Bruno. The story focuses on not only the struggle of Bruno to understand what exactly is going on in his new home, but his struggle to be with the young boy in the striped pajamas behind a barbed-wire fence. By using a child-like perspective of the holocaust, Boyne excellently helps to paint the idea that not all Germans were bad, again tying in greatly to this unit. Students will focus on Bruno and his naïve/innocent views help to shape the reader’s perspective of the Nazis and his sister Gretel who becomes a victim of Nazi propaganda. This last reflection will be done in an essay where students can use both the book and film to help support their claims.

Closing the Unit

After the essay with *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, students will be asked to look at propaganda one last time. The difference this time is, the propaganda will instead be anti-United States. After this, students will do one last SSW in which they examine how the Unites States is represented in the several different posters given. The goal of this final assignment is to have students recognize that almost every country demonizes their enemies, and that this is why terrorist groups today can reach such power: by giving a common enemy to fight against.

Closing Thoughts

With groups like ISIS terrorizing the world today, it is easy for young adults growing up today to be easily sucked in to patriotism and forget that even the “enemy” is human. Although we may not agree with each other’s ideals, we all have our own values that we must come to understand and respect. This unit will hopefully provide students with historical context to this idea by giving specific examples of some of the most notorious groups in history.

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