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11/27/12
Dr. Warner
Engl 112B

Reaching Perfection
Unit of Study: Utopias and Dystopias

What would exist in an ideal world? What values would society need to abandon? What values would need to be embraced? Required? In this unit on utopias and dystopias, students will explore the characteristics of a world with and without problems. Literature will look at the challenges that politicians and citizens face in creating a community that results in the most benefits.

The themes in *The Things They Carried* are important for developing a critical eye towards the decisions made in politics and society. Students who are informed about politics and social equality can be better contributors to their community. O'Brien also uses many literary devices such as the physical, emotional, and mental experiences the men carry in the book. Students will be able to identify and practice these devices in their personal writing.

Launching the Unit

A) Silent Sustained Writing:

1. How would you respond if you found out you were drafted into the war?
2. What would you bring with you (tangible and/or intangible) if you were drafted to a war? Write or draw.

Have a class discussion about memories, pictures, possessions that students would bring and why. This allows students to begin putting themselves in the shoes of the characters from *The Things They Carried*. Then introduce the work.

Main Text and How to Teach

In this unit the canonical work is *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien.

A) Themes to discuss:

1. The “things” people carry around them.

Assignment: This could develop into an autobiography project or into a personal statement for college applications.

2. Justice

a) Discuss: Was the U.S. government acting judicially regarding the war in Vietnam?

What makes the efforts of World War II different from this war? Would getting rid of war be “true” justice? Is it *just* for another country to go to war in order to “help” that country? ...consider the Iraq war?

b) Read the quote and have students respond to Sir Thomas More’s quote as to whether they agree or disagree.

“Extreme justice is an extreme injury: for we ought not to approve of those terrible laws that make the smallest offences capital, nor of that opinion of the Stoics that makes all crimes equal; as if there were no difference to be made between the killing a man and the taking his purse, between which, if we examine things impartially, there is no likeness nor proportion.”

— *Utopia*, Bk 1. (1516)

3. Patriotism

a) Discuss: How far must one go to appear or seem patriotic? How far is too far?

b) Have students create a graffiti wall responding to Hemingway’s poem: What do you notice is Hemingway’s opinions about war? What is your opinion? What advice would you give a friend about government, war, politics, or justice?

“Advice To A Son” – Ernest Hemingway

*Never trust a white man,
Never kill a Jew,
Never sign a contract,
Never rent a pew.
Don't enlist in armies;
Nor marry many wives;
Never write for magazines;
Never scratch your hives.
Always put paper on the seat,
Don't believe in wars,
Keep yourself both clean and neat,
Never marry whores.
Never pay a blackmailer,
Never go to law,
Never trust a publisher,
Or you'll sleep on straw.
All your friends will leave you
All your friends will die
So lead a clean and wholesome life
And join them in the sky.*

Additional Resources:

A) Interview with Tim O’Brien on BigThink.com

1. Regarding the reality O’Brien uses in *The Things They Carried*

“And I think we all live there, and you certainly live there in a situation such as a war where you’re partly—the reality of the world is in your face, and partly there’s the wistful call of girlfriends and home and all the things you don’t have but yearn for. Or your living partly in your imagination and not in a war and you’ll flow in and out of these two the way you would maybe in a cancer ward, or if your marriage is collapsing, or your father has died, or you partly have the stark reality of that corpse in that coffin, and you’re partly remembering your dad’s face as he threw you a baseball, or even more poignantly in my case, the wish that he were throwing you a baseball, the invented throwing of what wasn’t.”

2. Regarding the image portrayed of war in his father's time and his.

“Well, so there are mythologies of memory. And my dad carried with him out of World War II a mythology of America, the Lone Ranger, the doer of good, and the carrier of the democratic flame, and it had an undercurrent of almost a soundtrack of Frank Sinatra...Gene Kelly soundtrack running beneath it of buoyancy and of virtue. And the soundtrack that ran beneath the movie of Vietnam, you know, and all the people who are going to watch this know is not that “I’ll Be Seeing You,” “Sentimental Journey” soundtrack. It was a soundtrack of The Doors, and The Stones, and it was edgy and critical, and much more ambiguous soundtrack that more or less accurately reflected the ambiguities and the absence of certain moral underpinnings to that enterprise. Those are two pretty different edifices of this called mythology about a war. And mythology is a way of eliminating all that doesn’t fit into it. You sort of eliminate that part of it. And certainly that has happened, certainly for my generation as well as my dad’s.”

Extending the Unit

***The Messenger*. Dir. Oren Moverman. Perf. Ben Foster & Woody Harrelson.**

Sherezade Films, 2009. Film.

“[...] it’s a war movie, in a way, although none of it happens in war. It’s the notification of next of kin where they knock on doors and say, “Your son’s dead,” or “Your husband’s gone.” And although you know in the theater it’s not—they’re actors and so on, there’s a bluntness and a brutality and a horror to it that’s something that goes way beyond the John Wayne stuff and the actual war stuff, which has you kind of expect what’s coming. It’s a war, people are going to die and you harden yourself to it and they do. It’s a different experience to watch those knuckles on the door and door open and

that person die in front of you, that mother. That is what art is for. That's what it's for. It's for cutting through rhetoric and cutting through politics and cutting through convention to open a trapdoor in your soul." – *Tim O'Brien on BigThink.com Interview*

Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451*

Set in the 24th century, *Fahrenheit 451* tells the story of the protagonist, Guy Montag. At first, Montag takes pleasure in his profession as a fireman, burning illegally owned books and the homes of their owners. However, Montag soon begins to question the value of his profession and, in turn, his life. Throughout the novel Montag struggles with his existence, eventually fleeing his oppressive, censored society and joining an underground network of intellectuals. With his newfound friends, Montag witnesses the atomic destruction of his former city and dedicates himself to rebuilding a literate and cultural society. – *Gradesaver.com*

Suzanne Collins. *The Hunger Games Series*

In the ruins of a place once known as North America lies the nation of Panem, a shining Capitol surrounded by twelve outlying districts. The Capitol is harsh and cruel and keeps the districts in line by forcing them all to send one boy and one girl between the ages of twelve and eighteen to participate in the annual Hunger Games, a fight to the death on live TV. Sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen, who lives alone with her mother and younger sister, regards it as a death sentence when she is forced to represent her district in the Games. But Katniss has been close to dead before. By the third and final book, the Capitol is angry. The Capitol wants revenge. Who do they think should pay for the unrest? Katniss Everdeen. – *Barnes & Noble Co.*

Perkins Gilman, Charlotte. *Herland*

Herland is a utopian novel from 1915, written by feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The book describes an isolated society composed entirely of women who reproduce via parthenogenesis (asexual reproduction). The result is an ideal social order, free of war, conflict and domination. - *Wikipedia*

More, Sir Thomas. *Utopia*

Utopia is a work of fiction and political philosophy by Thomas More published in 1516. The book, written in Latin, is a frame narrative primarily depicting a fictional island society and its religious, social and political customs. - *Wikipedia*

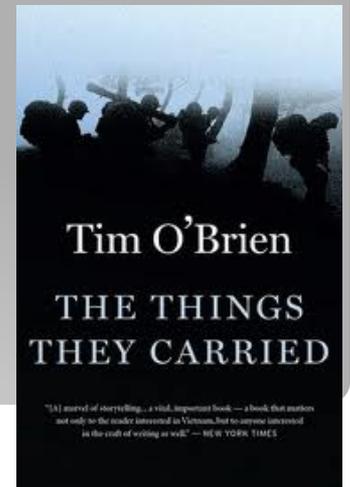
REACHING PERFECTION

*A Unit Study of Utopias and Dystopias Using
The Things They Carried*

Courtney Peterson
November 27, 2012
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Why should we teach this?

- Allows students to look at an ideal world
- Prompts critical thinking about literature, about self, and about community
- Many of the literary works, especially *The Things they Carried* provide many literary devices to identify, understand, and practice



Main text and teaching it

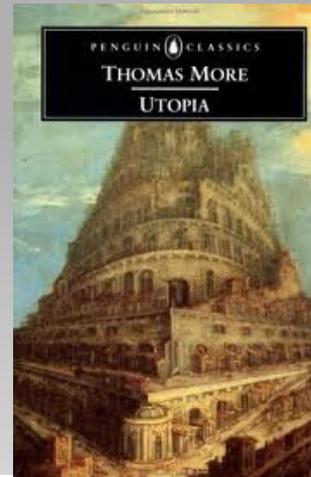
- *The Things they Carried* by Tim O'Brien describes a group of young soldiers recently drafted to the war in Vietnam. They learn about life, death, themselves, and each other as they experience life on the battlefield.



Main text and teaching it

- “Extreme justice is an extreme injury: for we ought not to approve of those terrible laws that make the smallest offences capital, nor of that opinion of the Stoics that makes all crimes equal; as if there were no difference to be made between the killing a man and the taking his purse, between which, if we examine things impartially, there is no likeness nor proportion.”

— *Utopia*, Bk 1. (1516)



Main text and teaching it

- "Advice To A Son" – Ernest Hemingway
- *Never trust a white man,
Never kill a Jew,
Never sign a contract,
Never rent a pew.
Don't enlist in armies;
Nor marry many wives;
Never write for magazines;
Never scratch your hives.
Always put paper on the seat,
Don't believe in wars,
Keep yourself both clean and neat,
Never marry whores.
Never pay a blackmailer,
Never go to law,
Never trust a publisher,
Or you'll sleep on straw.
All your friends will leave you
All your friends will die
So lead a clean and wholesome life
And join them in the sky.*



Main text and teaching it

- Regarding the image portrayed of war in Tim O'Brien's father's time and his own. -*Interview from BigThink.com*
- "Well, so there are mythologies of memory. And my dad carried with him out of World War II a mythology of America, the Lone Ranger, the doer of good, and the carrier of the democratic flame, and it had an undercurrent of almost a soundtrack of Frank Sinatra...Gene Kelly soundtrack running beneath it of buoyancy and of virtue. And the soundtrack that ran beneath the movie of Vietnam, you know, and all the people who are going to watch this know is not that "I'll Be Seeing You," "Sentimental Journey" soundtrack. It was a soundtrack of The Doors, and The Stones, and it was edgy and critical, and much more ambiguous soundtrack that more or less accurately reflected the ambiguities and the absence of certain moral underpinnings to that enterprise."



Extending the Unit

- *The Messenger* directed by Oren Moverman
- *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury
- *The Hunger Game Series* by Suzanne Collins
- *Herland* Charlotte Perkins Gilman
- *Utopia* by Sir Thomas More

