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Unit of Study: Dystopia

RATIONALE

For this Unit of Study, the central focus will be on the canonical text *1984* by George

Orwell. The reason why I chose this novel is because it garners many themes that make students

think more critically. Two of these themes being technology and autonomy. With technology

trending up and improving more and more as years go by, they begin to become a part of our

lives. But this raises the question of whether or not technology improves our lives or puts us at

risk. As Elon Musk has said, humans are basically cyborgs because of how much they interact

with the internet and their symbiotic relationship with technology to function in the world around

them. Even though we have made great strides in furthering technological advancements, there is

cause for concern when it comes to the privacy and security of our information. It is by looking

at Orwell's novel that we can dissect the more sinister side of technology.

Dystopian literature tends to showcase powerful figures that have control over the public.

In *1984*, the Party weaponizes technology in order to bend the will of the people. This

weaponization of technology brings up the dangerous potential it has such as: manipulation and

control over the past, present, and future. Along with the use of technology to control people and

history all together, the Party seeks to take away basic human rights. Orwell portrays the most

extreme totalitarian society, giving all the power imaginable to the government: watching over

the everyday lives of its citizens. They also deny every single person their own individuality,

even going as far as to monitor their own speech and thoughts; they would be severely punished

should what they say or think oppose the established correctness of the government. And of

course, Oceania's government stays in power because of technology, constantly reminding all the residents (through the cameras and posters) that Big Brother is watching.

This unit is to help students think critically about what technology does for people and if it, in fact, does have the capabilities of what occurred in Orwell's novel. It is important that students relate this novel to the real world and, in their own way, decide if we are somehow increasing our chances of living in a dystopia due to the constant evolution of technology. And also, would giving away someone's rights to privacy be justified with the prevention of any crime? This could be a very thought provoking question for many students, which can be connected to the Patriot Act that was established following the 9/11 attack. Nonetheless, the unit serves to enable students the opportunity to explore the implications of technology as well as the theme of autonomy and freedom.

INTRODUCTION TO THE UNIT

When introducing the test to my students, I would begin by asking them questions that push the narrative that technology has a very big positive impact on our lives. Some questions that would be good to use would be:

"What kind of technology do you use?"

"If you use your phone or computer, what do you use it for?"

Certainly, every single student in the room would point to their phone and have some kind of computer at home. Of course, there's always the possibility that a student may not have a phone yet, but the point is that MOST students have one kind of technology that is available to them.

After this it would be beneficial to have the students write about it in their journals. This time, it should be a more thought provoking question. It could be something as simple as:

"Is there anything negative that can come from technology?"

Roughly ten to fifteen minutes of journal writing should do.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In order for students to properly understand *1984*, it is important that they know what went ino Orwell's mind when creating this dystopian novel. In 1936, Orwell travelled to Spain in order to report on the Spanish Civil War. While he was there, he was able to experience the nightmare of fascist political governments. He would even live on to see figures such as Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin come to power and rule their nations with dictatorships. Orwell's experience would be the driving force behind his creation of *1984*. It goes without saying that the purpose of this novel is to instill fear in its readers and relay the destruction that comes from a totalitarian government.

DURING THE READING

As we read the novel, there will be sudden pauses at the end of each chapter to discuss topics and concepts that are being used by Orwell to tell the story. In order for my students to think critically, I will ask them questions spread all throughout the reading. An initial question after Part One of the novel would be:

"What is propaganda? And how does the Party use it to manipulate its citizens?"

Another question that relates more to the technological aspect of the unit would be:

"Is constant surveillance a bad thing?"

That last question may sound like it has a very obvious answer, but I would play the devil's advocate in the class by stating that the constant surveillance can prevent crimes from ever being committed in Oceania. This is meant to try and make the students think critically about what is wrong with the way the government works in the novel. Does the deterrence of crime actually excuse the unjust breach of privacy? In order for the students to truly understand the importance of this question, they have to continue reading and connect with Winston and his desire for autonomy. He is unable to be himself and go after his want for romance and freedom because of the Party, and the Party uses surveillance to make sure that their citizens are abiding by every single rule they have set up to prevent autonomy, with posters also being a reminder that "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU." Being monitored at all times is what halts Winston's development into an individual who can freely think and be himself.

AFTER THE READING

Once the reading is completed, I want the students the all gather their thoughts for a class discussion about what makes a dystopia a dystopia, and more specifically, what makes Orwell's *1984* a dystopia. As defined by Merriam-Webster, a dystopia is "an imagined world or society in which people lead wretched, dehumanized, fearful lives. During the discussion, I will have students point out characteristics(specifically from *1984*) of a dystopia. Of course, if students are too timid or shy, I can list some of my own on the whiteboard for them to think about:

1. Totalitarianism

2. Constant surveillance

3. Propaganda

4. The thought police

5. Individuality is gone

6. Love is forbidden

After this discussion, I want to ask the students a question from the very beginning of the unit, and hopefully, they can have a better sense of why the question is being asked this time:

"Is there anything negative that can come from technology?"

THE GUARDIAN VIDEO

In order to truly showcase to students the realism of the issues that Orwell depicted in *1984*, I will show the class a video that gives details about how the NSA takes record of everything we do on the internet and how they can peer into our lives without us knowing through the technology that we have. Even when our phones and computers are off, they can see us through our cameras and hear us through our microphones.

LINK: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GoM4jIZbTtQ

WRITING ASSIGNMENT

For me to gauge the students' understanding of the novel and the concepts found in dystopias I will have them engage in a writing assignment. The students will have two prompts to choose from:

1. *1984* is a representation of a dystopia in Orwell's eyes and is used as a warning to those in the future. What is Orwell trying to warn the people of today? Use specific examples from the text.

2. Discuss the role of technology in *1984*. How does the Party use technology to control its citizens? Use specific examples from the text.

OTHER READINGS

While *1984* is a very much one of the most influential novels in the dystopian genre, there are various others that do a great job of representing the genre. With a good introduction to dystopian literature and its themes, students will have a better experience when it comes to understanding the themes and concepts present in the following works:

1. *The Giver* by Lois Lowry

Taking place in a setting that can easily be mistaken for a utopia, the community has gotten rid of all war, fear, pain, and hatred. As a result, they have also lost what it is to feel love and happiness. Once he is of age to receive an assignment, Jonas becomes the new Receiver of Memory. With this, he is tasked with harboring all the memories of the past so that he can better guide the community on how to prevent any potential threats to the its sameness. This novel does a great job blurring the lines between a utopia and a dystopia. Everything in the community is structured in a way where everyone's occupation is something they are really good at, and they are all considered equal. But it is the idea that memories and emotions are vital to being a human and everyone in the novel has been stripped of these natural human characteristics.

2. *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley

Just like George Orwell's *1984*, Huxley presents a dystopian society in which an all-powerful government controls the actions and behaviors of its citizens. The biggest major difference between the two novel is that *1984* presents a government that seeks to maintain its control over people through constant surveillance, thought policing, manipulation of history, intimidation and torture; whereas *Brave New World* consists of a government that develops technological advancements that intervenes with the development of a child. This method of intervention manipulates the desires of each individual and conditions them to choose to fulfill

whatever the government wants them to do. With the people in this novel acquiring happiness at the expense of their freedom, Huxley poses the question of whether or not it is better to be happy or free.

Work Cited

Orwell, George. *1984*. Secker & Warburg, 1949.

Lowry, Lois. *The Giver*. Houghton Milffin, 1993.

Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. New York: Harper Brothers. 1932.