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ENGL 112B  
15 November, 2020

### Unit of Study: Dystopia

#### **Rationale**

As the world progresses further, technological advancements have been surging for the purpose of creating a better future. Technology has become a main part of many lives living throughout the world, and technology has become an important utility in living on a day to day basis. Afterall, technological advancements award the world with great boons: Endless entertainment, efficient self-sufficiency, long distance communication, academic accessibility, political awareness, and so forth. However, the endless possibilities with technology may also hinder the world with terrible vices. As the world becomes further built and depended upon technology, there comes the prevalent risk of people utilizing technology against the greater good of humanity. Oftentimes, the great boons given from technology overshadow the underlying dangers of technological possibilities. Without a cautious observation into present and future technological development, the misuse of technology may reveal a nearing or an already established dystopia.

For students, the discussion of technological practices will introduce them better into the complicated genre of dystopias, for technological development plays a role within creating sociological and psychological distress within a dystopia. In addition, the discussion helps to form critical thinking; many legal technological practices in the world reside in a controversial “grey” area. Although technological practices are advertised for the better of humanity, students

may venture into the implication and morality of the technology surrounding their communities and lives.

This unit focuses on sci-fi novels and films in the dystopian genre, as students begin to define the qualities of a dystopia. In addition, students may also reveal similarities between their world and the fictitious dystopian world— especially in relation with technology. In particular, *1984* by George Orwell exemplifies a dystopian use of technology, where free speech and free thought are invalidated through constant surveillance by the government, Big Brother. With *1984*, students may compare and contrast certain aspects within the fictitious dystopian world with real world events— past, present, or even future. So, the introduction of a dystopia offers students the chance to determine whether or not certain technological advancements benefit humanity or undermine humanity. Nevertheless, this unit aims to refine critical thinking skills for students; their working with dystopian tropes and exploring the implications of technological advancements hones their ability to carefully evaluate and observe important events within their lives.

### **Introducing the Unit:**

To begin, students will first be asked to write a journal entry upon various subjects of cyber privacy and dystopian tropes:

“Companies, advertisers, governments, and persons of interests have access to your recent history on your phone or computer. Whether through a video from YouTube or a purchase off of Amazon, are you okay with companies using your personal history to direct you towards other yet similar interests? Why or why not?”

**OR**

“Our digital space may be surveillanced for the sake of the country’s safety. Government officials may discreetly check our calls, texts, and search history in order to prevent and future criminal activities. Is this okay? Why or why not?”

These questions are some examples pertaining to cyber privacy and dystopian tropes. Once students complete their journal entry, they will discuss among their peers. While their discussion continues, an appointed “leader” of the group will share any similar or different thoughts to the class, which then forms quickly into a discussion.

Undoubtedly and regardless of age, students’ involvement in technological services may interest them in the topic of technology causing a dystopian world. But, because many qualities and tropes contribute towards the creation of a dystopia, students may find themselves overwhelmed in searching for specific themes or ideas. So, after the journal entry and discussion, students must learn about Orwellian ideas.

In a very brief introduction to Orwellian ideas, it will provide students an easier understanding of the novel and dystopias as a whole, for the Orwellian ideas contain themes found throughout dystopian novels— propaganda, surveillance, disinformation, “doublethink,” manipulation of history, and so forth. More importantly, the Orwellian idea combines all these themes to show a destructive conclusion through the use of technology.

After, students will be asked whether or not they have experienced Orwellian events within their lives. This question will provide insight into whether or not students have difficulty in searching for Orwellian themes in reality. In addition, students will also begin critically thinking of their digital space surrounding them: social media platforms, technological policies, and so forth. Regardless if students can or cannot find correlation between Orwellian themes and real events, examples will be provided. Some examples include: The Patriot Act, Tiananmen

Square, Hong Kong Protests, Citizenship Points, App Information Access, Net Neutrality, and so forth.

In combination of reading *1984* passages and knowledge of similar Orwellian events, students will have ease understanding *1984* and critically thinking to apply Orwellian themes towards real life scenarios.

**Centerpiece:**



What better way to teach Orwellian themes than to use the very novel in which the Orwellian concept originated from? As a centerpiece to the dystopian unit, *1984* provides a suspenseful and immersive journey by utilizing Orwellian themes. Although the novel contains

suspenseful and immersive scenes from Winston and Julia's journey through the authoritative and oppressing presence of Big Brother, the novel highlights certain key elements and tactics in successfully creating a dystopian setting; by chance, these key elements and tactics may feel familiar to students.

In the novel, not only are Orwellian themes present, but the themes are exemplified through different means and situations throughout the story. These themes that Winston and Julia observe and oftentimes fight against provide a concrete example for students to compare real world events to. For example, the power of propaganda applies within the story, for Big Brother controls the media and controls how to present the war through the use of government standardized televisions. This solid example of propaganda can be linked to real news companies, for Fox and CNN control their media platforms and how they choose to represent certain news. In addition, the theme of propaganda can be applied to the event at Tiananmen Square, where any information regarding the event is censored and managed by the government. Furthermore, the Orwellian concept of "doublethink" applies greatly to the real world of politics, which could be correlated to the contemporary culture of "fake news." Nevertheless, as students continue through the novel, they may easily find similarities between tactics used by Big Brother and tactics used by government officials in many nations.

### **Working With the Text**

As great of a novel in presenting multiple key factors in regards to a dystopia, the many examples of oppression and manipulation tactics may once again overwhelm students. Therefore, as *1984* should be treated as a multi-day reading assignment, students will have the opportunity to write notable quotes or scenes with their own reactions within daily journal entries. This will aid students in getting familiar with writing and critical thinking with the text. Furthermore,

certain questions for journal entries will be given to help students hone in on dystopian themes throughout the novel. For example, questions dealing with mass surveillance, rewritten history, oppression will be addressed for students to find textual examples through Winston's own account and affair with Julia.

When students become confident and comfortable in their journal entries, then students will begin writing short response papers with each assigned reading; these response papers will be a one page assignment that contains a clear thesis, a body paragraph with quotes and analyses, and a short conclusion. By building off of their journal entries, students will begin to implement essay composition and organization within their writing.

Furthermore, *1984* provides individual reasons towards why dystopias are terrifying, which offers plenty of content to write about. For example, with the constant surveillance of Winston and Julia as well as their rebellious actions against the government, their constant paranoia and fear in being caught fills the novel with anxiety and stress. Alongside journal entries pertaining to why Orwellian themes may be atrocious, journal entries and response papers will also tackle the mental state and burden on an individual's sanity while participating in a dystopian society. Oftentimes, Winston and Julia express familiar and heartfelt emotions, who many students can empathize with; however, the constant pressure of Big Brother quickly undermines or erases their familiar emotions. So, students will discover how dehumanizing dystopian worlds are. Therefore, as they understand how dystopian worlds may operate and what dictates a dystopian world through Orwellian themes, students will then understand why dystopias are truly horrific and terrifying.

Thus this concludes the goals within this unit:

1. Students will be able to fully demonstrate an understanding of a dystopia through examples from real events or from *1984*.
2. Students will be able to apply Orwellian themes to dystopian works and/or real life experiences/events.
3. Students will be able to establish a clear thesis supported by quotes and analyses in relation to dystopian themes.

### **Outside Reading**

Although *1984* presents a great example of a dystopian world, many other canonical and non-canonical works contribute towards exemplifying a dystopia. With an understanding of Orwellian themes, students can add their knowledge on these themes to better understand other works dealing with a dystopia. Some works include:

#### **1. *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury**

With themes of oppression and erasure of written knowledge, *Fahrenheit 451* fits well into the dystopian category, as many of the themes present within the novel correlate and overlap Orwellian themes. Similar to *1984*, *Fahrenheit 451* offers insight towards the consequences of erasing literature and knowledge for the sake of suppressing dissenting ideas. Like Winston and Julia, the main character of *Fahrenheit 451*, Guy Montag, finds the consequences in suppressing knowledge. Although not necessarily heavy upon the subject of using technology to oppress certain qualities in humans and communities, the novel still remains a good example of a dystopia through the simple national conduct of burning books.

#### **2. *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins**

*The Hunger Games* presents an accessible and immersive story in the dystopian genre. Plenty of Orwellian themes contribute towards the overall setting of the novel as well as the overall situation that Katniss must endure. Although the events of the Hunger Games do not necessarily pertain to Orwellian themes, the overall social structure and government oppression of the 13 districts clearly express Orwellian themes. In addition, the common use of propaganda within the book to disillusion certain districts and certain social classes correlate to Orwellian themes very well. So, as the novel is accessible and immersive for young adults, *The Hunger Games* exemplifies qualities and traits of a dystopian world.

### **3. *The Giver* by Lois Lowry**

*The Giver* is unique in exemplifying a dystopian world, because the novel deals with the contrast between truth and ignorance. Truth and ignorance are themes prevalent within *1984* and many other dystopian works, but *The Giver* focuses upon the contrast of truth and ignorance. Furthermore, *The Giver* brings a unique perspective where the story begins within a utopian setting. Only through truth, the utopian setting reveals to be a dystopia. This significant contrast between truth and ignorance aids students in understanding the importance of critical thinking. For their lives may seem utopian through examples from *The Giver*, but the truth obtained through critical thinking may unravel a dystopia instead. So, *The Giver* provides a great contrast between what defines a utopia and dystopia as well as the significance of truth and ignorance.

### **4. *Scythe* by Neal Shusterman**

*Scythe* depicts the causation of a dystopia through technological advancements. Although technology has advanced to the point where people no longer fear death through natural causes, it brings another problem— overpopulation. In order to solve this problem, another technological advancement, the “Thunderhead,” seeks to regulate the population through deciding who will



die. Similar to *1984* and *The Giver*, the technological advancement contributes towards a seemingly great utopia, yet in truth, the setting in *Scythe* resembles a dystopia. Although the novel might be considered far from reality or realism, Orwellian themes still persist within the novel. Alongside great genres such as science fiction and adventure, *Scythe* exemplifies dystopia with fantastical world building and immersion.

### **5. *The Maze Runner* by James Dashner**

*The Maze Runner* does primarily consist of adventurous and mysterious moments, but the dystopian setting may still provide insight towards students' defining a dystopia. Various Orwellian themes do appear in the novel, as oppression and fear frequently motivate characters to participate within the Glade's rules. Furthermore, mass surveillance and loss identity contributes towards the creation of a dystopia as well, which the main character further exemplifies through his journey in the Glade. Although mainly focused on science fiction, like *Scythe*, the novel defines important qualities and tropes within the dystopian genre.

### **6. *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline**

*Ready Player One* contains many hidden references towards the gaming culture, but the novel exemplifies the consequences of technological advancements; seemingly, the creation of OASIS allows citizens to virtually be anything and anyone. The creation of OASIS allows others to experience their own utopia. Although the novel does not focus entirely on the setting of dystopias, *Ready Player One* takes place within an already set dystopia. Therefore, the novel exemplifies details in defining a dystopia rather than details in creating a dystopia.

### **Other Content To Consider**

These works are non-canonical and away from the medium of literary novels and books. However, these works still fully express Orwellian themes and overall themes of dystopias.

Therefore, in this unit covering dystopias, these works may be further utilized to retain student interest in learning from the dystopian genre. Some works include:

**1. *The Matrix* by Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski**

*The Matrix* deals with dystopian themes through contrasting truth and ignorance. With truth, Neo, the main character, learns of the reality of humankind's entrapment within a simulated reality. Alongside action and science fiction, the film includes oppression and fear as well as the natural response of rebellion against the oppressors. Students may explore the idea of human nature to rebel against dystopian realities despite a utopian appearance— which, this theme is present throughout many dystopian works.

**2. *Equilibrium* by Kurt Wimmer**

Similar to *Fahrenheit 451*, *Equilibrium* censors and destroys every memorabilia, artifact, and art encouraging or resembling any form of “free” emotion. In order to maintain peace by eliminating any possible dissenting view, citizens must follow regulations to suppress their emotions through drugs. Like many dystopian works, *Equilibrium* exemplifies a humanistic need to rebel against dystopian settings. Alongside this, the film provides clear images and tones in details that define dystopias.

**Ending the Unit**

As students fill their journals with notable quotes and scenes from *1984*, they will already have compiled enough information and examples that define a dystopian world. Furthermore, with their collection of quotes and scenes, they may review their journals with their knowledge of real events. Lastly, they will be able to critically think about the consequences and implications of the world around them— government policies, company policies, group mentality, etc.

The dystopian genre in literature often is grim and pessimistic in technological advancements and government policies. With their collected knowledge upon dystopias, they may explore a more optimistic idea of what might prevent a dystopia. Therefore, questions may direct students in exploring real life events doing opposite of what is exemplified in dystopian novels. Finally, With their knowledge in regards to dystopias and their collection of quotes, a final essay will fully conclude the unit. Students should be comfortable writing, finding quotes, analyzing quotes from the text, and applying Orwellian themes to reality.

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