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## Dystopia's Many Forms and Human Civilization's Many Possibilities

### **Center Piece and Rationale**

Human civilizations vary across time and space: they have changed over the years (sometimes even reviving old ideas about society) and the societies of any two nations in the world at any given time will have many differences despite being contemporaries. It is no surprise then that to this day there are many disagreements between those who study or criticize societal structure. From philosophers to political scientists, there are many academics who tackle the very difficult subject of how humans should be organized in order to most effectively live with each other in a community. For a teenage student that does not have decades of accumulated social theory under their belt, dystopian literature can be an accessible form of social commentary through which a young adult reader can be exposed to different ideas about the society around them. The settings of dystopian literature create a microcosm of real world societies that allows a student to engage a manageable set of themes that they can use to aid their understanding of human societies. Just like with nonfiction social commentary, dystopian literature is diverse in the ideas it presents about human societies, and students can explore multiple works with distinct, or even contradictory, themes.

William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* is an excellent work to serve as a canon center piece for a dystopian unit. Aesthetically, it does not necessarily resemble most dystopian works, which are typically futuristic to some extent. However, like any other dystopian literature, *Lord of the Flies* creates a microcosm of society in its depiction of the group of marooned boys' attempts to organize themselves on the island they find themselves trapped on. Through this novel, students will consider the challenges that humanity may face in trying to organize itself into a community or society, and the possibility that human nature is savage by nature and is not necessarily conducive to a peaceful society. The novel is critical of humanity's apparent propensity for violence, such as in its ironic ending where a naval officer stepping off of a warship is chastising the boys for violent behavior, and presents civilization as a way of inhibiting such violence (though not perfectly, as can be seen in the inclusion of the warship in the novel's ending).

However, such a pessimistic view on human nature and individual freedom is not the only worldview available, and another dystopian piece can be used to contradict this idea in order to allow students to come up with their own conclusions about how they view human nature and society. Teaching *Lord of the Flies* on its own may lead students to believe that humans being inherently savage and civilization being at odds with the natural state of human beings are absolute truths. Instead, this unit aims to make it clear that different novels by different authors may present entirely different themes, and though the themes are objectively present in the novel, it is up to the reader to decide which themes actually apply to reality. It is not important what conclusions the students arrive at, as long as they are given the opportunity to explore different

viewpoints and develop critical thinking skills that they may use when developing their views about the real societies that they themselves live in.

### **Unit Overview**

The unit should be introduced with an explanation of what a dystopia actually is. The *TED-Ed* video “How to recognize a dystopia” by Alex Gendler is a quick five minute overview of the genre and the historical context that birthed the genre. Discuss with the students what some ideas they would have for a utopia would be, and then try to figure out what it would take to create those utopias and how it may turn out to be a dystopia in reality. It is also possible to integrate historical examples into the discussion, particularly the ones mentioned in the video: the fascism of Nazi Germany and the socialism of the Soviet Union. This initial discussion should get students thinking about how different ideas for creating a perfect society can easily backfire, and disagreements should be encouraged not only between the students, but also with the teacher. Political beliefs are very likely to come up when discussing the implications dystopian literature makes about society, so it is important to keep the tone of discourse polite and respectful. After this introduction to dystopia, the first reading itself can be introduced.

Before beginning *Lord of the Flies*, the novel should be paired with a young adult dystopian work that deals with differing themes about human nature and society. This novel should preferably be read before *Lord of the Flies*, as it should be more accessible to the students than the canon work it is being paired with. *The Giver* is an excellent choice because instead of cautioning against the dangers of human nature in the absence of civilization like in *Lord of the Flies*, *The Giver* instead cautions against the dangers of civilization repressing the positive aspects of human nature, such as love.

When wrapping up *The Giver* (or another piece of dystopian literature being paired with *Lord of the Flies*), students should be asked to consider whether or not they agree with the themes presented by *The Giver*. If necessary, the teacher can play devil's advocate for the sake of allowing students to consider the different opinions one may have about human nature and how much freedom individuals should have to exercise their natural tendencies. Again, while there may not necessarily be a very wide array of interpretations for the themes present in the reading, there is plenty of room for disagreement and debate when discussing these themes and applying them to reality.

Once the first novel is done, the class may move on to *Lord of the Flies*. Have the class compare the society that is being created by the characters of *Lord of the Flies* to the previous dystopian work read in the unit, and highlight the implications of the similarities and differences that they notice. For example, if working with *The Giver*, the students' attentions can be brought to the fact that society in *Lord of the Flies* begins to go wrong when order collapses, while in *The Giver* Jonas fights against societal order to bring happiness back to the people of the Community. By the end of *Lord of the Flies* the class should now have an alternative understanding of human nature and society that differs from the one that was gained from reading the first text in the unit. When *Lord of Flies* is done being discussed as its own work, a closing discussion for the unit can be held in which the class compares the viewpoints presented by the two texts that they read, and the class may also quickly share which viewpoint they agree with more.

## Discussion Questions

### *The Giver* Example Questions

- What gets lost when people are forced to conform and get along? Is getting rid of conflict worth it?
- Jonas and the Giver realize that bringing back difference also means bringing back horrible things like war. Should people be able to choose to wage war?
- Can you think of examples where you or somebody else tried to control something too much and it made things worse?

### *Lord of the Flies* Example Questions

- Do you think that humans are naturally savages without civilization? What would you do if you woke up one morning and all the adults in charge of you were gone?
- What do you think gives people the right to have power over others? Do you think it's fair for a vote to put somebody in charge of everybody, even the people that didn't actually vote for them?
- At the end of the novel the boys are scolded for their violent behavior, but the naval officer came from a warship. What does this say about civilization and violence?

## Additional Works

The intended length of the unit is taken up by the reading of two full novels, but in the case that the unit can be extended, the following texts are some suggested additional readings that are relevant to the unit:

Ginsberg, Allen. “Howl.” *Poetry Foundation*,

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49303/howl>.

“Howl” can be taught alongside both *The Giver* and *Lord of the Flies*, or even used as a closing piece after reading both. From its commentary on mental health, which can be compared to the mental control in *The Giver*, to its condemnation of war and violence, which can be tied into *Lord of The Flies*, this lengthy poem has plenty of relevant themes to incorporate into the unit.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. “Young Goodman Brown.” *Young Goodman Brown and Other Tales*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

This short story can be another entry into the idea of humanity’s hidden savagery beneath the front it puts in “civilized society,” making it a great companion to *Lord of the Flies*.

Yeats, William Butler. “The Second Coming.” *Poetry Foundation*,

[www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43290/the-second-coming](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43290/the-second-coming).

Yeats’ post-war poem can be tied to the violent breakdown of civilization that occurs over the course of the plot of *Lord of the Flies*.

### Works Cited

Golding, William. *Lord of the Flies*. Penguin Books, 2003.

Lowry, Lois. *The Giver*. Houghton Mifflin, 2004.