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English 112B

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*Fahrenheit 451*: Literature with Social Commentary

**Rationale:**

I want to center my unit around social commentary because we are living in a world where we need more of that than ever; as my writing professor said this semester, “Everyone became a different [person] after 2016.” So I want my unit to have relevance to what is happening in the world today because I hear too often, “why do we have to learn this stuff? It’s not going to mean anything once I graduate.” Although I believe that everything that is learned has relevance, students at the middle or freshman-high school level may need the connections to be more apparent. This unit allows for the relevant question to be answer immediately with another question: “Have you seen the things happening in the world today and how diverse voices and opinions matter now more than ever?”

I picked *Fahrenheit 451* because of how the novel treats language and the vessels that transmit human knowledge for centuries: books. There is a certain irony that students are reading a book that revolves around the main character burning books. Also, Guy Montag has a character arc that is an interesting play on several archetypes, including an “Innocent Embarking on a Journey,” an “Archetypal Seeker,” and a “Lover,” (from Chapter 10 of *Literature for Today’s Young Adults*). Further, since *Fahrenheit 451* is a widely-taught novel, this lesson can be practically implemented in almost any district without backlash from administration.

The main thematic connection I see between this unit and the larger world is how the things Bradbury writes about are already occurring today. Bradbury once said, “You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them.” While I like to believe that this axiom has trump yet, there is a certain discrediting of literature and journalism as “fake news” that hurts those who use language to create and comment on culture. Pre-2016, teachers needed to point to faraway nations on a map to show examples of authoritarian regimes that castigates the media and literature. Even though California is a “sanctuary,” it is still part of a nation that has allowed for misinformation to flourish for that last three years; there would be an inexhaustible list if I started listing all the offenses on this nation’s leaders.

Finally, dystopias. What is it? Do we live in one? How to fix it if we do live in one? These are the guiding questions that I will write and keep on the board for the entirety of the unit to remind students of the importance of what we are learning. This will also relate to the supplementary work that students will explore in this unit, including short stories, poems, and films. I am also considering flushing out this lesson into “Project-Based Learning” to extend the unit beyond *Fahrenheit 451* and add further activities that go beyond reading and discussion.

**Supplementary Works: (p) = poem; (f) = film; (ss) = short story**

* “Bent to the Earth” by Blas Manuel de Luna (immigration, class) (p)
* *Black Panther* directed by Ryan Coogler (race, political systems) (f)
* “First They Came ...” by Martin Niemöller (genocide, humanity) (p)
* “Harrison Bergeron” by Kurt Vonnegut ([in]equality, disability) (ss)
* “The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson (mob mentality, conformity, tradition) (ss)
* *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* directed by Hayao Miyazaki (war, environment) (f)
* “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” By Ursula K. Le Guin (ethics) (ss)
* “There Will Come Soft Rains” by Sara Teasdale (human extinction) (p)
* “When It Changed” by Joanna Russ (gender, feminism) (ss)
* *Zootopia* directed by Byron Howard and Rich Moore (diversity, prejudice) (f)

**Plan/Activities:**

* To begin this unit, a hook lesson will be taught. Students will answer the following questions in complete sentences on a paper provided for them or on a document on a desktop; this will be the preface activity for a larger class discussion:
* What are the social issues they find most important in their lives today?
* Why does this issue exist today?
* What can be done to ameliorate this situation?

This activity allows for students to form their own ideas before we begin reading so that when we incorporate later supplementary material, they have ideas of the general direction they want to go. They also get to reflect on what they find important rather than what the teacher tells them is important. Further, it provides an opportunity for students to brainstorm their ideas before we discuss their questions as a class.

* Show the TED-Ed video “How to Recognize a Dystopia” by Alex Gendler on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6a6kbU88wu0>). For homework, ask students to formulate as list of all the dystopias they have ever heard of in literature, film, art, video game, etc. on a piece of lined paper. This will allow for the teacher to check for prior knowledge and also challenges students to bring up all relevant material in their background to this unit. This will be used as the second preface activity before we begin reading the novel and will be revisited in the unit wrap-up.
* The first part of *Fahrenheit 451*, “The Hearth and the Salamander,” will be read together in class via an audiobook. In my experience, starting a new book is difficult because one does not have a guide; an audiobook is a guide in that it enables students to listen before they have to jump into the book themselves. The teacher will pause and ask clarifying questions to assure that students are paying attention and not taking the recording for granted. There will be two reading quizzes for this section to assure that students are following along. Reading question that relate to the quiz can be assigned for homework.
* There will also be routine vocabulary quizzes and while we read *Fahrenheit 451*, the words will come from the novel. I anticipate reading the first part will take about a week at a rate of about fifteen pages a day, so there will be a vocabulary quiz at the end of each part with about 15-20 words. I anticipate three today quizzes before we return to supplementary/SAT vocabulary.
* Part two, “The Sieve and the Sand,” is the shortest section in terms of length so students will read this part at home. In class, they will also be pair with the person sitting next to them as a reading buddy to mirror the events of the novel; they will be asked to answer a few questions about this section together. Next, they will also read “Dover Beach” by Matthew Arnold in class and dissect the poem for meaning and analyze the poem for craft; this is the poem in the book that brings on of the characters to tears. Each pair will share one observation about the poem regarding its themes, devices, or meaning.
* The final section, “Burning Bright,” will be read aloud in class, but without an audiobook. Before beginning the reading, tell students that there will be a quotation explication (open book, two quotes per section for six total) and a recitation activity (more about this later).
* The final section will be read aloud in class but students will be doing the reading this time. This will take 3-4 days and students will be required to read a page before picking another person. Remind students that participation credit will be delegated based on how well they read each section, so they should pay attention. Ask if students have any question at the end of each major break in the novel.
* Recitation project: Students will be asked to memorize a significant passage or monologue. They can pick anything from literature, film, video games, comics, etc. as long as they check it in with the teacher first. Songs are prohibited since it is almost impossible to separate it from the music and thus circumvents the assignment’s purpose. General guideline for teacher: enough material so that students actually have to spend time memorizing and practicing their recitation. The point of this assignment is to mirror what Guy Montag has to do near the end of the novel like the rest of the people in his “rogue” community. Students will have to perform in front of their classmates.
* Finally to put this novel in a larger context, students will pick a supplementary work listed above and create a project/presentation in groups of no more than four. They will have to answer the following question in their write up (very detailed) and in their presentation (brief/summarized points):
* What is this narrative about? (summary)
* What social issue this is work commenting on and why are these issues important in today’s society?
* How does the work provide commentary on the issue through its narrative? What is it doing that a nonfiction piece cannot do? (students may need to consult teacher for clarity on this point)
* What are the meaningful passages, lines, or scenes that makes this piece “art”? (read or show a sample to demonstrate point and explain)
* Why should this narrative be preserved? (its importance in the canon and relates to *Fahrenheit 451*)
* How has this narrative changed your (plural) thinking regarding global issues?

Students can either present with a PowerPoint/Prezi in front of the class or create a video that addresses these points; estimated time of presentation should be 7-10 minutes. Even if they choose to do a video, students must answer any questions the teacher or their classmates may have for them. Depending on the kind of class the teacher has, there can be assigned groups or preferential groups. Further the teacher can include anonymous peer assessments to assure that each member contributes substance to the project.

* Return all work from this unit to students. Ask students to reflect on how their understanding of social issues have grown or changed because of this unit. Also ask students to keep their list of dystopias ongoing for the rest of the year and in the future as they move on to the next grade so that they can add to it later. Finally, allow time for students to discuss any final points they have about this unit.

**Summary of Assignments:**

* Opening (Hook) Assignment Questions
* List of Dystopias
* Vocabulary Quizzes (3)
* Reading Quizzes (3-5)
* Reading Question (optional, depends if students want these as quiz aids)
* Quotation Explication
* Recitation
* Final Project/Presentation

**Building a Larger Unit: Literature Circles**

* Students will pick one (list order preference) of the following novels that have elements of social commentary and young adult themes and work in groups.
* Books: (This is a dynamic list; these titles are just a few that are consider classics.)
* *The Book Thief* Markus Zusak (genocide, intolerance, war)
* *The Giver* by Lois Lowry (difference, liberty)
* *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (police brutality, race)
* *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* by Erika L. Sánchez (gender, mental health, culture)
* *A Night Divide* by Jennifer Nielsen (liberty, political systems)
* *Shiloh* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor (animal abuse, tradition)
* *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (gender, privilege, rape culture)
* *We Were Here* by Matt De La Peña (mental health, poverty, race)
* *The Whale Rider* by Witi Ihimaera (gender, tradition)
* *Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher (mental health, poverty, race)
* Roles will rotate so that each member in a group of four does every role at least once.
* Facilitator – Provides the summary and major themes.
* Figurative Language Seeker – Finds three or more different types of figurative language devices the writer uses in the section. Must cite textual evidence.
* Quotation Finder – Finds a minimum of three significant quotations and explains their importance in the section.
* Vocabulary Enricher – Finds at least 10 vocabulary words and provides the definition of each word. Must cite the page and sentence for each word.

**Conclusion:**

I picked this novel as my central text because it has many of the Exeter and Honor Book qualities even though its protagonist is a grown man.

* Exeter:
* Exciting plots that include secrecy, surprise, and tension.
* Characters that go beyond typical experiences.
* Varied levels of sophistication that will lead to the continual development of reading skills.
* Honor Book:
* Fast pace.
* Optimistic, with characters making worthy accomplishments.

Essentially, even though Guy Montag is of adult age, his mind is still that on adolescent who is learning about the world from “fresh eyes” because of the violent and conspicuous censorship imposed by this dystopic society. There is no reason a brainwashed teenager cannot inhabit the role of Guy Montag in the context of the novel.

I also like that *Fahrenheit 451* is just the right length for a five to six week unit plan. The novel’s reading should take four-five weeks and the final week can be used for project and presentations; it is practical for me and I can see implementation of this unit depending on what grade I will teach in the near future. Since I am in the interesting situation of already having a credential, I know what can be implemented and would not have much trouble translating this unit into lesson plan format for administration and using this as part of my induction.