

## The Anti-Utopian Novel: Making Connections by Pairing *1984* with *The Giver*

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Human beings have long been intrigued by and have believed in the possibility of an ideal society. This fascination reveals itself in early forms of literature (e.g., Plato's *The Republic*, Francis Bacon's *The New Atlantis*, and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*).

Though one can hardly argue that human beings have lost their desire for a utopian world, recurring revolutions and civil wars led by such dictators as Hitler, Stalin, Khomeini, and Hussein have thwarted our vision of a world filled with peace and harmony. Replacing this idealistic vision has been a rather global fear of totalitarianism—the notion that one controlling agent can direct, manipulate, as well as control the lives of others. More and more, teachers are including in their classroom anti-utopian literature, literature that describes the dehumanizing effects of totalitarian rule and that illustrates what can happen in society if democracy and human integrity are denied. Such literature, we hope, may encourage students to appreciate and support democracy and human integrity.

George Orwell's *1984*, a classic example of anti-utopian literature, is a novel that is frequently used in both the English and social studies high school classroom to inform students of the dangers associated with autocratic rule.

The loss of individual identity, a frequent theme in anti-utopian literature, is central to the meaning of the text. Young adults, having a robust desire to make a statement about their own individuality, should identify strongly with the text; however, because the central characters in the work are adults positioned in adult worlds, teenagers may have difficulty connecting with their life experiences. They may not connect the central character's loss of identity with their own thoughts concerning their own individual identities.

Pairing this work with a young adult novel that features teenage protagonists involved in similar conflicts, however, may aid students in understanding individuality and, at the same time, may move them further toward considering the dangers and effects of totalitarian rule. Thus, what follows is a classroom approach to pairing *1984* with Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, the 1994 Newbery winner for young adult fiction. Like *1984*, *The Giver* depicts a "perfect" world void of individuality and humanism.

### *Brief Synopses of the Novels*

George Orwell's *1984* describes an imaginary world—Oceania—a world under totalitarian rule, where individuality is nonexistent and human beings are completely dehumanized. Individuals are allowed to have no feelings—even thinking is a crime. All human activities are closely monitored and controlled by Big Brother.

The central character in the novel, Winston Smith, works in the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth, where he revises past historical accounts depicted in newspapers. Dissatisfaction with the overreaching authority of Big Brother forces Winston into a state of depression. Discontentment prompts him to rebel against the authority of the oligarchy in a number of ways: he keeps a writing journal; he travels among the excluded class for human contact; and he strikes up a sexual relationship with a young woman named Julia. Winston doubts not that he will be caught for his "crimes" against Big Brother, and upon being arrested, he pays dearly for his rebellion.

*The Giver* revolves around twelve-year-old Jonas, who receives his life assignment at the Ceremony of the Twelves. His role is to become the next Receiver of memories. Jonas's teacher, who calls himself the Giver, is the only human being who has retained any knowledge of human feelings

and emotions. He alone has the memories of humanity's mistakes and failures, as well as memories of humanity's triumphs, rewards, and pleasures. His role is to transmit these memories to Jonas. Jonas receives the memories of love, hate, war, happiness, sorrow, pleasure, and pain, among others. Upon receiving these transmissions, he becomes aware of the impersonality of the society in which he lives. Like the central character in *1984*, he becomes depressed with the "robotic" life he sees around him. Angry with the complacent attitude in the Community, he flees the Community, taking a child destined for destruction. As he escapes, he releases human memory into the community.

### *Parallel Themes in the Two Novels*

Numerous parallels can be found between the two novels. Among them is the theme of alienation, which is symbolized by the protagonists in both novels. In *1984*, Winston experiences loneliness. Hoping to void himself of feelings of loneliness, he seeks gratification in

Julia and in associating with the excluded class. Winston, however, is unable to find fulfillment in his relationships and pays a dear price for his involvements. Likewise, Jonas, the protagonist in *The Giver*, is alienated from society. Upon being given the life assignment of the Receiver of human memory, he learns that he alone is the sole carrier of human knowledge, experiences, and feelings. As he gains both positive and negative experiences in his transmittal sessions with the former Receiver, he makes several futile attempts to share human feelings with others.

Control mechanisms play a fundamental role in each novel. Electronic devices such as those used in *1984* to monitor all human activity are echoed in *The Giver*. Likewise, language manipulation is a means by which people are controlled in both novels. Language is simplified to the point of eroding truth or distorting reality.

Finally, living conditions are similar. Citizens in both novels are led to believe that living conditions are the best they have ever been, when in reality, they are quite the reverse. No room exists in either novel for individuality or for humanization; thus, citizens in both novels live robotic, complacent lives. Individuals in *1984* are forbidden to think; to do so is considered thought crime. In *The Giver*, thinking is unnecessary: all decisions from what everyone eats for dinner to when children are given bicycles—are made for the people.

### *Pre-Reading Activities for The Giver*

To facilitate the unit, begin with pre-reading activities that encourage students to think and/or talk about what they already know about power, authority, individuality, and human integrity. Through either small and/or large group discussion or free writing, students may explore any of the following ideas:

1. Describe a situation in which you felt you were powerless or totally out of control of your own destiny. What was the situation? How did you feel?
2. Describe a situation in which you felt you could not be yourself. What was the situation? How did you feel?
3. Tell about a time in which you were forced to conform or compromise your beliefs.
4. Tell of a time that you had to obey someone in authority when your own personal convictions, beliefs, and/or values told you that you were right.
5. Relate an event when you felt good about your own individuality.
6. Talk and/or write about what makes us human.

7. Describe your own perfect world.

#### *While Reading The Giver*

As students read through Lowry's novel, have them keep a journal in which they respond daily to their reading. Encourage, but do not limit, their writing to the ideas of power, authority, individuality, and human integrity. Give them ample opportunity to share their responses in small group, as well as large group, settings. Though responses and discussion about the text should primarily follow the students' lead, the following questions may be used as springboards for journal writing and for group discussions:

1. What are your reactions to the novel?
2. What feelings and/or thoughts does reading the novel evoke?
3. What characters are you particularly drawn to or not drawn to? Why or why not?
4. Place yourself in the shoes of any character at any point during your reading, write about how you feel as that character.
5. Choose a particularly moving passage or scene and tell why you find it compelling.
6. Which characters (if any) feel powerless? Why or Why not?
7. Do you see any ways that any of the characters feel alienated? Can you think of any incidents in your own life in which you felt on the outer rim of your own social world? What placed you there?

#### *Post Reading Activities for The Giver*

Students should have had many opportunities to explore their own ideas, thoughts, and interpretations of the text as well as those of their peers in small or large group discussions before proceeding to post-reading activities. Students may work individually or in small groups on any of the following activities:

1. Become Jonas. Brainstorm in small groups his feelings throughout the text. What alternative decisions could he have made? How might the story have ended otherwise? Rewrite the ending of the story or any other particularly moving scene.
2. Choose a particularly moving scene and either dramatize it or perform a reader's theater reading of it.
3. Create a community newspaper. Consider what it would look like, what it might be titled, what kinds of news it might contain, and how articles might be written. For instance, how might the destruction of infants at the Nurturing Center be revealed? How would the Ceremony of Twelves be described? et cetera.
4. Lowry tells us that human memory is released into the Community once Jonas flees, but we do not know what actually occurs in the Community once people have gained human memory. Speculate on what might happen and write a chapter for the book from another character's point of view. For example, how might the Giver describe the situation, or how might Jonas's father relate the events? How would their points of view be similar or different?
5. Ask students to consider the relevance of their own cultural heritage. What family lessons, experiences, have they gained from? What, if anything, will they hopefully not have to endure as did

their forefathers? Carry this activity further by asking them to think more globally. Consider historical events in the past. What, if anything, have we as a society learned from war and conflict?

Students may think of their own ideas for responding to the text. Naturally, their ideas should be considered. After students have had sufficient time to choose and plan their responses to *The Giver*, have them share their activities with the rest of the class. A class share will afford them the opportunity to create an interpretative community. By encountering a variety of responses to the text, students will broaden their own interpretations of the text and begin understanding that no definitive interpretation of any text exists (Milner & Milner, 1993; p. 100).

#### *Pre-Reading Activities for 1984*

Pre-reading activities for *1984* should encourage students to think about overriding authority in society and the exploitative and oppressive nature of autocratic governments. Students should be introduced to terms that are often used to describe such governmental systems (e.g., oligarchy, autocratic, dictatorial, totalitarianism, tyrannical, fascistic). Several ideas for pre-reading activities follow:

1. Working in small groups, have students brainstorm a list of abuses that they find in their own social world (e.g., local powers of control, state, federal).
2. Prior to the unit, begin your own collection of newspaper and magazine articles that describe happenings in countries under totalitarian governments. Bring these to class and allow students time to read through and discuss their thoughts about the articles.
3. Have students bring to class their own newspaper or magazine articles and share them with their classmates.
4. Arrange a library day with the school library. Take the class to the library where they spend the period researching about countries controlled by totalitarian forms of government. Have them share their findings with the rest of the class.

#### *While Reading 1984*

The reading of *1984* will take a bit longer than the reading of *The Giver* and, of course, will be more difficult. Divide the reading assignment into sections and ask students to maintain their response journals as they work through their reading. In addition to the following questions, questions suggested under reading activities for *The Giver* might also be used to facilitate student responses to their reading:

1. What parallels can you make between the text and the society in which you live?
2. What themes are emerging in your reading? Why are they relevant to you?
3. Discuss the media's role in Oceania.

#### *Post Reading Activities for 1984*

After students have completed their reading of *1984*, allow them an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings about the novel. Ask each student to choose a journal entry and share that response with the rest of the class. To facilitate classroom discussion, you may wish to encourage group discussion on the following topics:

1. Discuss whether an Orwellian world is possible.

2. Brainstorm ways in which you feel that we are already living in the world of *1984*.
3. We all know ways in which our actions can be controlled, but can you think of ways that even our own thinking can be controlled? What are they? Are there organizations that practice mind control?
4. Do you see any forms of Newspeak in society today? What are they? How do they affect us?

#### *Culminating Activities for Both Novels*

Culminating activities should focus on ways of drawing parallels between the two texts and relating these similarities with individuals' own lives. Several suggested activities follow that can be used for both discussion and writing activities; however, encourage students to develop their own ways of making connections. In either small or large groups, encourage students to compare and contrast any of the following.

- Characters who feel alienated from the world. (How do their own personal feelings relate to those exhibited by the characters?)
- Control mechanisms (e.g., monitoring devices, language manipulation).
- The idea of complacency.
- Totalitarian rule in the societies of Oceania and the Community. (What similarities do they see with American society? with other parts of the world?) The notion of individuality versus conformity. (Students may see central characters rebelling against conformity. Ask students to parallel their own struggles for individuality in an adult dominated world with those of Winston, Julia, Jonas, or the Giver.)
- Truth versus untruth.
- The third person point of view used in both novels. (How might the stories have been different had they been written from another character's point of view? For instance, consider Winston, Julia, or O'Brien telling *1984* and the former Receiver of human knowledge or Jonas narrating *The Giver*.)
- The use of language as a manipulative device.

Given the horrors that history has shown us about governing systems that overstep their boundaries of authority, anti-utopian literature can inform both young and old alike about the dangers of totalitarianism. Though *1984* is a classic example of autocratic rule, the fact remains that it contains an adult protagonist and is written for an adult audience. Thus, students may have difficulty connecting with important messages about power and abuse of power present in the text. Pairing Orwell's class work with Lowry's *The Giver*, a young adult novel containing a young adult protagonist, can aid students in connecting their own thoughts about authority and abuse of authority with similar themes present in both texts.

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