



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2021 Volume I: U. S. Social Movements through Biography

From Handmaids to Riot Grrrls, using Fiction to Understand Social Movements

Curriculum Unit 21.01.10, published September 2021
by Tara Cristin Waugh

“Now I'm awake to the world. I was asleep before. That's how we let it happen.” -- Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*.

“The sleepwalkers are coming awake, and for the first time this awakening has a collective reality; it is no longer such a lonely thing to open one's eyes.” -- Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision”

Introduction

A week before introducing *The Handmaid's Tale* to my students over Zoom during a pandemic, Trump supporters, wanting to overturn the electoral vote for the 2020 election, invaded and vandalized the United States Capitol building for several hours, disrupting and attacking Congress. Shocked at what we saw, my students and I discussed what happened and they conveyed their feelings of unease, fear, and anger at the event.

A week later when we were reading the dystopian novel, we got to the part where it explained how Gilead was formed. Describing how the Gileadian coup began, the main character and narrator Offred reflects, “Now I'm awake to the world. I was asleep before. That's how we let it happen. When they slaughtered Congress, we didn't wake up. When they blamed terrorists and suspended the constitution, we didn't wake up then, either. Nothing changes instantaneously. In a gradually heating bathtub, you'd be boiled to death before you knew it.”¹

I hadn't taught *The Handmaid's Tale* for several years, so I had forgotten about this part -- how Gilead started. The day we discussed this chapter of the book, my students obviously drew parallels to the recent events that occurred the previous week, floored by the eerie similarity. We spent a good deal of class time speaking about how a society could let this happen. Students made comparisons to Nazi Germany and the Iranian Revolution of 1979, as we just read *Persepolis*. We discussed social movements and revolutions, both present and past, and I began to realize the importance of teaching students about the power and structure of these events to

not only help them understand fiction, but their reality as well.

With this unit, I intend to have students truly understand what a social movement is and the inner-workings of how social movements organize, mobilize, and implement change. Even though my students are 16-17 years-old, I want them to know that their voices and opinions matter. After my many years of teaching, I continue to see my students be more and more civically and socially engaged. From gun control walkouts to protesting at Women's Marches and Black Lives Matter rallies, my students, more than ever, are speaking out against social injustices. With that in mind, having students understand how a social movement works and planning their own, even if it is fictional, will allow them to see how their voice-- their participation in a social movement can fight against social injustices in our world.

Teaching Situation and Rationale

I teach at a magnet school in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It has a diverse student body, ranging from those students who help support themselves and their families to those who are extremely wealthy. Specifically speaking, at Booker T. Washington High School, our current student body is 35% African American, 36% Caucasian, 3% Asian, 13% Hispanic, 9% Multi-Race, and 4% American Indian with 38% free and reduced lunch. My classroom reflects this diversity. Also, the three classes I teach, Pre-AP English II IB-MYP (focus on World Literature), AP Language and Composition (focus on American Literature), and IBHL Literature I, have students with ranging abilities, so it is important that I differentiate and scaffold my instruction, as well as build in some flexibility for those students who need it. This unit will be written for my AP Language and Composition and my IBHL Literature classes, but I feel like the information and texts will be useful for other grade levels as well.

The Handmaid's Tale: Connection to Social Movements

When my students start reading *The Handmaid's Tale*, they go through many stages of grief. Expecting a hero, the first thing they realize is how plain, uninspiring, and complacent Offred is upon learning her new role of Handmaid in Gilead. The second realization they make is how dependent Offred is on men, especially concerning her husband Luke and her new love interest Nick. They then champion characters like Moira or even Offred's feminist mother, only to find out that both strong female characters are eventually broken. Finishing the final chapters of the book, they end in a state of frustration with no true resolve as to what happens to Offred. Finally, in its Historical Notes, they get to see Offred reduced to nothing and used as the butt of a joke. A snooty male professor from the future focuses on her Commander's history, overshadowing her story and showing that not much has changed for women. Despite its dissatisfying and dismaying ending with no victories for the women in Gilead, it is these elements that engender a feeling of rebellion against the mistreatment of these women in fictional Gilead, and against the mistreatment of women in our own world.

Born from this frustration and from the recent adaptation of the book into a television series, a new women's social movement has been formed. *Hulu's* adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* has brought the 1985 text to the spotlight, and with its powerful visuals and visceral acting, this modern adaptation "showcases the ways in which women struggle within power structures surrounding consent and the body."² Not only has this adaptation brought to light issues concerning rape culture, sexual assault, sexism, and LGBTQ+ discrimination, it has been received as a call to action for women around the world to stand up against these injustices. It is clear that this series and book have ignited the fire for the Fourth Wave of the women's social movement.

Mimicking the costume seen in the television adaptation, people have donned the red cloaks and white bonnets as a symbol of resistance to protest issues regarding women's rights, particularly in the realms of anti-abortion and #metoo demonstrations. Amy Boyle notes how *The Handmaid's Tale* and its costume has a tangible influence on politics and feminist activism around the world.³ Most social movements use powerful leaders to voice their message, like Betty Friedan for the women's movement of the '60s and '70s or Stokely Carmichael for the Black Panthers. Instead of a powerful voice, this Fourth Wave of the women's movement is using the nameless, silent image of the Handmaid to visually unify their message against "the heteropatriarchal system"⁴ that exists not only in Gilead, but our world too. It is like that old saying, "a picture is worth a thousand words." The visual of women dressed as Handmaids gathering to protest the injustices against women is just as dynamic and persuasive as a compelling speech a movement leader might give. The way that this show and novel are rallying women around the globe cannot be ignored, and using the visual strategy of the Handmaid symbol is imperative to continue to shape modern feminist communities and conversations.⁵ This social movement technique uses a popular TV series and world-renowned book's powerful imagery to bring women's issues to the forefront. Ultimately, this shows how fiction can inspire political activists and even start social movements, which is important for students to see and understand.

Now, my students may not have watched the series, and if they have, they may be totally unaware that it was based on a book they are going to read in English class. Some may have watched the show and know a little bit about the impact it has had in protests about women's issues. It will be important for students to understand the effect the show and the book have on our society. Almost as interesting as this work of fiction instigating a social movement, is how the TV series has decided to continue the story of Offred and the Mayday Resistance against Gilead. Boyle points out that "*Hulu's* move to document the revolution beyond Atwood's novel is pertinent -- 'because of what is going on' in the world, 'we need *The Handmaid's Tale*.'"⁶ The TV show's producers, the actors, and even Atwood herself, after realizing the effect it had on the world and the response from fans which appropriated the Handmaid symbol for today's injustices against women, felt that it was necessary to continue the revolution and finish Offred's story. Soon we will see the demise of Gilead and it is certain "that the handmaids' revolution will be televised."⁷ This idea brings me and countless others so much joy. There is a certain power in this reimagination-- this continuation of the story. That is the power I want to give my students with this unit; I want them to feel what it is like to be in the center of a social movement and revolution. If they can continue this story that seems almost too close to reality through a fictional social movement, they will understand how to change their reality when the time comes.

Although my students will be reading the book and not watching the show (clips would be brought in from time to time), the attention the show drums up mirrors the richness and importance of the novel itself and its message. What cannot be ignored is the fact that this book inspires social action because it deals with injustices that plague society today. This dystopian novel-turned television show helps to converge fiction and politics. When writing *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood was inspired by the events in her world. Teaching students the historical context that influenced the creation of Gilead is a huge benefit as well, and is usually the approach taken by many teachers. Atwood not only was responding to her experiences at Harvard, but to the feminist movement of the 1960-70s, which eventually led to a backlash - the Conservative Right movement of the 1980s. In many interviews, she has cited that she was also inspired by the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Communist reign of Ceaușescu in Romania, the Lebensborn movement in Nazi Germany, the Berlin Wall, etc. She collected many of her ideas from newspaper headlines and used these events to fuel her dystopian vision. The book's historical context is replete with stories of social movements of the past, and within the novel itself, we see the strategies and effects of social movements in this dystopian world. Because of this, we can see how teaching this novel alongside the importance and structure of social

movements can be so useful. Introducing this information to students about *The Handmaid's Tale's* influence on today's society will show them how a work of fiction, on one hand, can inspire social action in real life, and on the other, how current events and social movements of the past can inspire fiction.

Unit Content

This four to five week-long unit is designed to have students understand the importance of social movements and how they are used as vehicles for change. As mentioned before, my students are consciously aware of how movements influence society, as they have seen the effects of Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate, to just name a few. This unit should also remain timeless and, most importantly, relevant to your students, so feel free to replace the social movements I have chosen to focus on with others that appeal to your student population.

First, I would introduce the need for social movements with a focus on the strategies and tactics used in various movements. Then, I would use the biography of Kathleen Hanna to do a quick mini-study on the Riot Grrrl Movement through the use of lecture, slides, pictures, and clips of a documentary. Students will take notes over this information during this first week, knowing that they will need this knowledge to help their understanding of *The Handmaid's Tale* and with the culminating activity. Using the information about Hulu's series *The Handmaid's Tale* mentioned earlier in the unit and providing the usual brief historical and biographical context, I will introduce the novel and assign the readings and guiding questions since they will be reading this novel from a social movement lens. Through whole class discussion and reading quizzes, we will make our way through the novel, which usually takes about two weeks. The last week or two will focus on the final activity, which will ultimately merge our overall study of social movement tactics and strategies and the Riot Grrrl collectivization and use of zines to our reading and analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Guiding Questions

Why is it important to understand social movements? How can literature help us understand the need for social action? How can literature inspire social action?

The Strategies Behind Social Movements

To begin this unit and before I introduce *The Handmaid's Tale*, I will have students brainstorm about social injustices they see now in their world and examine what people are doing to combat those inequalities. After we make a list of the various ways people try to right the wrongs in our world, students should start to understand the need for social movements in our world. Then, I will formally give them the basic information about what a social movement is and have them write this down in their notes. In *Social Movements*, Paul Almeida defines "A social movement [as] an excluded collectivity in sustained interaction with economic and political elites seeking social change."⁸ Unifying under a common goal, he also describes how "social movements are usually composed of groups outside institutionalized power that use unconventional strategies (e.g., street marches, sit-ins, dramatic media events) along with more conventional ones (petitions, letter writing campaigns) to achieve their aims."⁹ In their history classes, students should have already studied many of the bigger social movements in American History. So after we discuss what a social movement is, I will have students name social movements that they know about, noting any prominent leaders and speakers.

I will then assign a short, informal research project giving students specific movements to define each movement's main goal(s) and most effective strategies. For example, you can have them research the Civil Rights Movement and its use of civil disobedience to end segregation and to build support for the Voting Rights Act. This will be an informal and quick research opportunity, and they will prepare a simple presentation about their social movement to the class which will be discussed in detail later in the unit. As presentations occur, the whole class will compile a list of tactics and strategies used by the researched movements to incite change.

If students don't mention some of the lesser-known tactics that people can use in social movements, I would give students information on everyday forms of resistance or what Almeida calls "weapons of the weak"¹⁰ to give an even more comprehensive look at tactics used in the face of extreme danger in a violent, oppressive atmosphere. In these types of environments, excluded social groups will use "petty theft, gossip, work slowdowns, noncompliance, and vandalism."¹¹ These are lesser-known tactics, but need to be defined, as they might be useful to students for the final project of this lesson.

By the time students are done presenting information about social movements and their strategies, we will have a comprehensive list that students should take notes on. The list that students generate should include writing letters to policy makers, getting the media involved, using social media campaigns, grassroots political backing that could include envelope stuffing or door knocking, picketing or strikes, organizing boycotts, street theater about the issues, and sit-ins or walk-outs (actions of civil disobedience).¹² I will inform students that they will need this information not only to understand the historical context of *The Handmaid's Tale*, but to help in the study of a particular social movement, in the analysis of the book, and in the creation of the final project for this unit. One point I will make at the conclusion of our broader understanding of social movements is that social movements sometimes occur in response to each other. For example, I would mention how the feminist movement of the '60s and '70s eventually led to a backlash - a reactionary social movement which was the Conservative Right movement of the 1980s. This will be a crucial understanding to have before beginning the novel because they will be immersed in the dystopian world that was formed from an extremely conservative reactionary social movement, and they will be asked to respond to that movement through acts of resistance and protest.

The Riot Grrrl Movement

After two to three class periods of discussing social movements and the strategies they use to communicate their message, I will turn my students' focus on the Riot Grrrl social movement as a deep dive into a movement that communicates a strong feminist message while using grassroots, DIY (Do-it-yourself) techniques, like the use of zines, that I know my students will find captivating, since it is a movement started by young people and enveloped in the punk music scene- the epitome of teenage rebellion.

Riot Grrrl Rationale

Before I introduce the novel, I want to teach my students about a hidden, underground feminist social movement from the early 1990s that, I argue, has a strong connection to *The Handmaid's Tale*. In *Girls to the Front*, Sara Marcus describes how this movement was a youthful response to the conservative backlash of the 1980s. It deals with issues such as rape culture and sexism and responds to conservative movement's ripping apart the feminists of the 1960s and 1970s. During this backlash, second wave feminists were called anti-family, man-haters, and anti anything feminine. In 1989, one of *Time* magazine's covers asked, "Is there a future for feminism?"¹³ As many people began to feel as if feminism was dead, an ember began to glow.

Marcus writes that “a movement that loses its young eventually dies out.”¹⁴ The second wave of feminism might have taken a hit, but the young never just abandon an important cause. Instead they needed to make it their own -- rebrand it, if you will. Young women in the early '90s felt this backlash in the news, in popular culture, and in their high schools and colleges. Feeling isolated and angry, some young women decided to find their voices in some alternative ways, using alternative spaces -- particularly through the use of zines. In “U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style!,” Ednie Kaeh Garrison describes Riot Grrrl as a “young feminist (sub)cultural movement that combines feminist consciousness and punk aesthetics, politics, and style.”¹⁵ Now, while this social movement may be overlooked by many, it is the perfect movement to bring to the classroom because it was started by young people and has an energy and aesthetic that I know my students will gravitate towards. It was a movement that was raw, messy, and uncensored -- and one that seemed like it couldn't succeed. Can teenage girls really be taken seriously? Can they really change anything? These young people wanted to challenge those questions. Through personal narrative, creative writing, music, and art work, girls who were taught to be complacent and silent were now loud and brazen. They wanted to take the messages of the “old” ladies from the feminist movements of the '60s and '70s and make them accessible, more engaging for young people. It is through the use of zines, its unified message through personal narrative and creative writing, and its punk rock aesthetic that this unit will draw inspiration from for the culminating activity. Through this particular use of tactics, these Riot Grrrls formed a network of support, communicated feminist ideas, and created a movement that spread across America in a time when there was no quick access to technology. This movement encapsulated all of the properties of a successful social movement, making it a perfect example to use with students to empower them to make societal changes.

This social movement also reminds me of *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the '90s, young women were basically told to smile and look pretty in a predatory, male-dominated society perpetuated by the media and popular culture. Their mothers/ grandmothers experienced the dichotomy of the second wave and the subsequent conservative backlash. These young people felt the residual effects of this split. The Handmaids were also told to be silent and open their legs. They were also dealing with issues of conformity, sexism, rape and sexual assault in this dystopian male-dominated theocracy. The Handmaids would very much want to rebel if truly given a chance. We hear stories of what that rebellion looked like in the book-- everything from Moira's escape from the Red Center to a Handmaid's suicide. This makes me wonder what their resistance and rebellion would look like if they were given a pen. I envision it being just as angry and just as DIY as the Riot Grrrls.

Kathleen Hanna: Using Biography to Understand a Social Movement

To illustrate the true impact of a social movement and humanize its mission, focusing on the biography of social movement leaders can add more engagement for students. For example, teachers often focus on leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. or Betty Friedan to generate interest in social movements. Using the lead singer of Bikini Kill, Kathleen Hanna, will be an accessible way to provide visuals and understanding of the leadership and inner workings of this subversive group. The documentary, entitled *The Punk Singer*, focuses on Hanna and her influence on Riot Grrrl. As a teacher, I will not show the whole documentary, but clips of it. Be aware that this documentary has curse words, so prescreening and selecting your clips is advised. As always, the culture of your school and your students will deem what is acceptable. However, the benefit of seeing Riot Grrrls in action is so powerful. If a teacher did not want to show clips of the documentary, there are so many media images that can be found on the Internet.

To introduce Kathleen Hanna, I will first have students listen to one of her songs and analyze her lyrics. I use music often in my classroom to generate interest in a subject matter because my students are constantly listening to music. I suggest starting with “Rebel Girl,” “Double Dare Ya” or “Jigsaw Youth” which may be more

school appropriate. However, Bikini Kill has many songs to choose from and, ultimately, it would be up to each teacher because their lyrics could be considered risqué in certain educational settings. Next, I will bring in her manifesto to have students know this influential leader more intimately. The first Riot Grrrl zine manifesto can be found through a simple Google search and is listed on the resources below. The manifesto is a prime example of Riot Grrrl's message and focus for the movement. Having students analyze this will not only help them better understand the Riot Grrrl movement and its message, but will also allow students to use close reading skills to truly ascertain the author's purpose, using a primary source.

Kathleen Hanna is one of the most outspoken, famous leaders from this social movement because of her involvement with popular bands such as Bikini Kill, Le Tigre, and The Julie Ruin. From the documentary, students will be introduced to Hanna's "origin story" and her involvement in Riot Grrrl. Hanna went to college in Olympia, Washington at Evergreen State College, studying photography. There she met many people who influenced her - one of them being Tobi Vail, who Sara Marcus, author of *Girls to the Front*, describes as "an Oly punk who played in the Go Team and wrote a fanzine, the thick and hyperliterate *Jigsaw*."¹⁶ Meeting a like-minded girl musician and fellow feminist, Hanna and Vail decided to start a band that would speak to the complexities and contradictions of being a woman in the early '90s in the most outspoken and punk rock ways. Hanna was a fearless entertainer, often scrawling in marker the word "slut" on her stomach and instructing people who attended her shows on feminist issues plaguing the 1990s such as anti-abortion issues, rape, and slut-shaming. She would often ask the men who were offended by her feminist ideas to leave or call them out so other people would know that this heckling and mistreatment was not okay. She would not be silenced by anyone. She soon started calling girls to the front of the stage, not only for their (her band members and girls in the crowd) safety, but to literally create a barrier from the violent moshing that typically occurred in the boy-dominated punk scene. She, Tobi Vail, and others created their first *Riot Grrrl* zine in D.C. while they were there for the summer.

Along with creating the zine, they held the first Riot Grrrl meeting at the Positive Force House, where she shared her Riot Grrrl manifesto and encouraged other girls to write their own. Over time and as she continued to make headway with her band, she became one of the primary leaders of this movement, even though she didn't want to be considered the movement's leader. Marcus describes a Riot Grrrl meeting and describes how Hanna "had a way of talking that made all the present obstacles seem temporary; she brought the future victory into focus. When she talked about the revolution, it wasn't just rhetoric; she meant it."¹⁷ With her passionate drive for this group and its message and her recent media attention with the explosion of '90s alternative music scene thanks to bands like Nirvana, Hanna began to feel attacked. Like many other social movements, their leaders seem to be criticized from all angles. According to *The Punk Singer*, she eventually did a media blackout because she did not want to commercialize and commodify the Riot Grrrl message and style, which ended up happening despite Hanna's objections. Thanks, MTV. Riot Grrrl groups sprung up throughout the nation and other leaders emerged. Hanna took a brief hiatus from the music and media scene due to her battle with late stage lyme disease, but she never lost her passion for the Riot Grrrl cause. Even to this day, she continues on her feminist path, doing what she can for social movements that promote justice and equality.

The History of Riot Grrrl

After introducing the music and writings of Kathleen Hanna, I would give students information about the history of Riot Grrrl using Google Slides. I would have students take notes over the history, especially the techniques and strategies used in this movement, because they will be recreating a Riot Grrrl-style zine at the end of this unit. Using pictures and clips found on the Internet, I would create slides that would juxtapose

images next to the information about this social movement.

The Riot Grrrl movement began in the early 1990s in Olympia, Washington, where some young women met to discuss sexism in the punk scene. Eventually, these girls set out to discuss their issues not within the confines of just a few people, but wanted to find others who felt the same way. These girls decided to make their own zines. Soon-to-be-called Riot Grrrls used the tools of “print and visual media; music genres, technologies, and cultures; girl-positive and woman positive expressions; revolutionary and social justice discourses; shock tactics; nonviolent actions; and the Internet.”¹⁸ These Third Wave feminists use these tactics “to raise consciousness about, provide political commentary on, and resist and educate against racism, child abuse, rape, domestic violence, homophobia and heterosexism, ablism, fatism, environmental degradation, classism, the protection of healthcare rights, reproductive rights, and equity.”¹⁹ In simpler terms, these young girls, tired of sexism, of society silencing or ignoring them, and of seeing all the injustices in the world around them, created zines where they voiced their concerns and passed them out at concerts and other places and then began this network of support. So you might ask yourself, how did this really become a social movement-- one that caused national impact? Social movements usually start around common grievances and these Grrrls had some. Almeida defines social movements as “excluded social groups that mobilize using noninstitutional tactics to target political and economic elites.”²⁰ The Riot Grrrls fit this definition.

Soon, leaders of the movement emerged. Tobi Vail, Donna Dresch, Kathleen Hanna, Allison Wolfe, Molly Neuman, Jen Smith, and Erin Smith were among the first leaders. All of these women were in bands and they were the producers of zines. Once certain bands like Bikini Kill (Kathleen Hanna, Tobi Vail, and Kathi Wilcox) and Bratmobile (Allison Wolfe, Molly Neuman, and Erin Smith) toured and their musical success grew, word about Riot Grrrl spread. Bratmobile moved to the D.C. area; Bikini Kill visited. Riot Grrrl meetings emerged. Once these bands received more attention from the media and the idea and messages of Riot Grrrl grew, more chapters sprung up nationally. At these meetings, the group was “beginning to unify their energy and anger.”²¹ This ember became a full-on forest fire, melting the broken pieces of the second wave and literally melding it back together in their own unique way.

Despite its grassroots beginnings with zines, Riot Grrrls met to discuss important feminist issues, held conventions, and attended marches and rallies for women’s causes. It gained national attention, especially in the world of music and pop culture. However, much like the second wave, Riot Grrrl’s fire was put out by 1996 thanks to the media and fractured goals and messages. Many of the group’s leaders, like Kathleen Hanna, were venomously attacked or down-played by the media or even other celebrities. Riot Grrrl groups disagreed with each other about their unified messages and differences emerged, much like in the second wave. In *Girls to the Front*, Marcus believes that movement failed because no leader could survive. The movement “had never tolerated anything that smelled remotely like a hierarchy.”²² It also lacked organization and communication. Garrison argues that the Riot Grrrl movement might not be this highly mobilized social movement,” but it is despite its lack of true organization or its underground, non-mainstream methods, it “still rall[ied] young women around a common goal”²³ -- girl power and fighting against the patriarchy.

Importance of Riot Grrrl Zines

Another important aspect of a social movement is to form a collective identity and to unify their message. These Riot Grrrls did this and “adopt[ed] punk DIY philosophy to encourage women and girls to take the initiative to create art and knowledge, to change their cultural and political landscape, rather than waiting for someone else to do it for them.”²⁴ As mentioned earlier, they did this through the use of zines. These Riot

Grrrls “make use of low-end-- or ‘democratized’-- technologies and alternative media to produce hybrid political texts such as zines and music through which they disseminate knowledge and information about subjects such as (but not limited to) feminism in local-national distribution networks.”²⁵ Starting in Olympia, Washington through the local music scene, these zines started catching on like wildfire. They contained personal editorials, rants, reviews, poems, interviews, drawings, comics, stories, solicited letters from friends, and reprints from mass media.²⁶ They used this cut-and-paste structure and a copier machine to create these raw - in appearance and emotions- booklets that “engaged in the important political processes of re-envisioning and revising ‘feminism’ and ‘girlhood’ in the contemporary United States.”²⁷ These zines served as a visible artifact of resistance. They would call girls to mark their hands with stars and hearts with sharpies as a “secret” way to identify other Riot Grrrls. As Boyle reminds her readers when describing the use of the Handmaids as a visible symbol of women’s issues, “Visibility is crucial to community formation and members’ identity development in relation to others.”²⁸ This is what those zines did. It created a visible space where the angry, teenage voice could reside. These zines were “printed on a single sheet of paper folded into quarters, both sides crammed with the blowsy, uneven letters of a manual typewriter,”²⁹ and had names like *Riot Grrrl*, *Girl Germs*, *Teenage Gang Debs*. They would provide addresses so girls could write to each other and interact. They did have to work to find each other, but they eventually did. These zines were distributed through grassroot ways - “independent bookstores, reading groups, rock concerts, and community centers.”³⁰ Eventually these zines begin to “serve a dual private and public function. The zine’s rants spaces, on the one hand, offer places away from oppressive home, school, and work environments where young women can confess, receive support, and regroup. On the other hand, they constitute a ‘training ground’ for cultural and political activities directed toward wider publics.”³¹ At this point, I will definitely share images from these zines, so that students can understand their construction and layout. You can find this from simple Google searches, and I will share links to some of my favorite images down in the resources section of this unit. In small groups, I would give images of various pages from the zines to have students examine these primary source documents. They should take notes about elements, writing style, and graphics used on each page. Again, they will need this information later for one of the final projects. Students may not understand the reason for studying the Riot Grrrls right away, but once they read *The Handmaid’s Tale*, they will recognize the similar feminist themes. Finally when they are given the final project of creating their own Handmaid zine to help unite the mistreated women of Gilead, the connection to Riot Grrrls will come full circle.

Teaching Strategies

Small Group Informal Research and Presentation

Many teachers introduce research in formal, all-encompassing ways such as a lengthy research paper which takes a month to write. Teachers do the same things with presentations. These are usually huge anchors in any classroom. For this unit, I want to invoke a quick, informal research and presentation strategy. Most students have access to the Internet through the use of their phones and are used to the phrase, “Just Google it.” This is typically how they get their information. I do it too when I need a quick refresher or when I simply need a fast answer. I will group students together in small groups and ask them to pick a subject to do a quick research on. This will be a great time to do a quick review on finding credible sources while using Google. It doesn’t have to be long- just a few reminders. Give a set of questions to guide their research. Give them 20-30 minutes to research and answer the questions and to find two to three visuals that can be displayed. You can

have students create a presentation on chart paper or use a free platform like Prezi or Google Slides. Then the next day, each group will give a five-minute informal presentation teaching the class about their subject. This can be an easy way to disseminate a lot of information.

Reading as Social Movement Theorist

Along with my usual annotations, looking at use of language and syntax, characterization, imagery, etc., I will have students read the book through a social movement theorist lens. While reading *The Handmaid's Tale*, students will be examining the results of a successful, albeit fictional, social movement for a theocracy which created the nightmarish society of Gilead and paying attention to its creation. What steps did they take? How did they mobilize and unify their group and message? This novel, more importantly, shows us how Gilead maintains control. So, students should also ask how they do this and what techniques do they use to continue their control over Gilead? Students should also look for ways that the Mayday Resistance organizes. How is their message spread? What tactics and strategies do they use in comparison to other social movements we learned about? These questions will guide their reading through a social movement lens. Students would use post-its or paper to record their observations about how this movement was successful, along with the typical English classroom annotations.

Whole-class Simulation and Role Play

Some of the best lessons I have created transform my classroom into something else. From fictional courtrooms during the Salem Witch Trials to pitching episode ideas for *Black Mirror*, my students thrive in whole-class simulation and role play. In a recent educational study, authors found that using simulation and role play in the classroom “offer[s] students a chance to increase confidence in their abilities to understand and interact with others, and be empowered to voice their ideas and act with intention and purpose. Such learning opportunities can enable them to fully participate in our democratic way of life, in both the protected spaces of schools and beyond.”³² As cheesy as it sounds, when you take away the normal educational setting and you give students something else they can imagine, they are way more engaged and willing to do the tasks - which usually involve writing- that I ask them to do. The final project will ask you to turn your classroom, maybe even your school, into Gilead, assigning students specific roles to play.

Zine Creation and Publication

Create a zine using a few sheets of copy paper and the cut-and-paste method of the Riot Grrrls. Encourage use of handwritten writings, manipulation of media, typewriter fonts, etc. The goal would be that you could easily reproduce copies to be passed around your classrooms, maybe even your school, depending on the content and how supportive your school is. Knowing that something will get into the hands of others will make most students more mindful of their message. It is important that they know their audience and what the zine's purpose is.

Classroom Activities

Modern Social Movement Research

In small groups consisting of four to five students, I plan on giving my students choices to research: Black Panthers, Civil Rights Movement, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, Occupy Wall Street, Women's Movement of the '60s and '70s, and the Conservative Right Movement of the 1980s. The Women's Movement, #MeToo, and the Conservative Right Movement all deal with the issues that are echoed in the novel, the older movements helping to provide some historical context as well. Because I want students to see how social movements deal with a variety of social injustices, I added Black Panthers, Black Lives Matter, Civil Rights Movement, and Occupy Wall Street. I would randomly assign each group one of these movements. Teachers are welcome to use other social movements like Gay Rights Movement or Labor movements; the ones that I chose use a variety of strategies that would allow my students to get a comprehensive list of tactics social movements use to convey their message and fight against injustice. In their research, students will ask questions such as what are these movements working against and responding to? What were their methods of organization? How did they get their cause and message to the public? Who was attracted to this movement and who was not? Was this movement successful? If not, why not? Students will use the information and terminology of the anatomy of social movements and give short group presentations. I will have students use the free platform Prezi to give multimedia examples of the social action tools of their social movement. Teachers could also use other platforms such as Google Slides. I prefer Prezi because it allows for all types of media and it incorporates movement which is apropos for the subject matter. In this Prezi, students should include pictures of protests, examples of print sources (zines to newsletters), slogans, songs, and speeches used.

Culminating Activity: Revolution Handmaid-Style!

Set the stage for your students. It is the late 1980s, early 1990s. The Handmaids within Gilead have had enough and need to do something -- even if it starts small. People outside Gilead have no idea what is really going on inside, but have heard information that has leaked out about the injustices and mistreatment against women. The women inside Gilead feel isolated and angry, especially about being brainwashed into fulfilling their prescribed role in this sexist society. Students will have the chance to participate in a fictional social movement against Gilead, using whole-class simulation and role play and zine creation and publication.

Riot Grrrl-style Zine for The Handmaids' Resistance

While introducing this part of the final project, I will give students background about the *Hulu* show and Handmaid symbols which was discussed earlier. Describe how the *Hulu* series is moving beyond the book because of the novel's frustrating resolution. Students will get in small groups or they can work solo. Here, they will create a Riot Grrrl-style zine from the voices of the oppressed in Gilead. They can choose whichever character they want. They can write from the point of view of a Martha, Moira, Offred, or Janine. They could use any Handmaid mentioned in the book or even take on the persona of an Econowife, a Jezebel, a young girl being indoctrinated at Gilead's schools, or an Eye turned rogue -- the options are endless and I will encourage students to be creative. Each zine should contain a poem, a manifesto, personal narrative, drawings and media manipulation, slogans for the revolution, information about meetings, subversive messages on how to anger the Wives or Commanders, ways to rebel (remind students about Almeida's "weapons of the weak"), and ways to protect yourself. They are already familiar with what these Riot Grrrl zines look like due to the earlier mini-study of this early '90s social movement, and these images should still be made available for

students to revisit as they are creating their own. These students will use the Riot Grrrl method of zines to get their words and ideas out. From reading the book, students will recognize that “language in Gilead is recognized as a very powerful tool; its disruptive power is intuited, and hence only those in power are allowed to use it.”³³ Of course, the Handmaid’s main weapon of rebellion would be the written word. Unlike the Riot Grrrls, they would never be able to be loud, to perform music, or to actively protest. However, they could secretly exchange ideas through these zines which could be passed around through hidden channels and tucked into sleeves or under floor boards. For the women of Gilead, “to have something to ‘exchange’ is to have social power, a power women are forbidden. In Gilead, the silent woman is the ideal woman.”³⁴ As writing and reading are absolutely forbidden, they cannot be seen with these zines. You should point out that the zines will function just like the phrase “Nolite te bastardes carboundorum”³⁵ that Offred discovers in her closet. She knew this phrase was from another Handmaid and this message became comfort for her; “It becomes her prayer.”³⁶ It is so important for the women of Gilead to find like-minded people, just like the Riot Grrrls did, to begin their underground, subversive, DIY resistance within, spreading and unifying their message.

By creating these fictionalized zines, they will not only evoke anger and frustration of the unhappy people of Gilead, but they will also begin to build a collective identity and mobilize characters in the book. Simulating the beginning of this Handmaid revolution will not only be cathartic for them, but will show them how the written word can unify a disembodied, marginalized group. This will be beyond what a normal high school writing experience can give students because their work will be published and distributed. Zines should be reproduced and shared between all the classes.

Organizing a Fictional Social Movement Against Gilead

After students create their Handmaids’ zines, I want them to become part of the Mayday resistance and put to use their study of social movements to organize a fictional resistance against Gilead. Because of the Handmaids’ zines, word has gotten out about the mistreatment of the women who reside in oppressive Gilead. It is time for the rest of the world (aka your classroom) to organize a social movement against the injustices occurring in Gilead. As a class, students should brainstorm what their social movement will look like. I plan on bringing a few short excerpts from Atwood’s *The Testaments* that give examples of how Atwood envisioned what the protests against Gilead looked like. The pages for these excerpts will be in the Resources section of this unit. After their brainstorming session and taking in consideration their creative ideas, I will give students options to write a persuasive speech, create propaganda posters with symbols that represent the movement, write a letter to fictional politicians or leaders of Gilead, write and perform a street theater skit, create a step-by-step plan to organize a rally or sit-in, along with chants and signs, or write a Mayday manifesto or unity message for the social movement. Giving students a week to prepare, I will give them a specific day for a Mayday Protest Day in class, or even within the whole school. On Mayday Revolt Day, students will share their speeches, letters, chants and signs, etc. in class. If you can pull it off, maybe there would be a sit-in, disrupting a History class or another English class with their permission, maybe they dress all in red, maybe they perform their skit at lunch and film it, maybe they put posters up around the school, or maybe Handmaids’ zines get passed out to others around the school. The options are endless here, but regardless if this is a small classroom activity or a bigger school-wide affair, the energy should be there -- an energy of a social movement daring to create change and fight against social injustices. After simulating and role-playing the Mayday social movement, students should have two feelings: First, they should feel a sense of accomplishment and strength as a group as they strived for justice for Offred and the women of Gilead. Secondly, they should feel empowered. They will truly understand the inner workings and power of social

movements -- a knowledge that will allow students to understand that they can stand up against any injustice in the real world.

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

Standards -- Oklahoma Academic Standards for English Language Arts -- 11th grade. These standards can be easily cross-referenced to other standards.

11.3.R.1 Students will analyze the extent to which historical, cultural, and/or global perspectives affect authors' stylistic choices in grade-level literary and informational texts.

Before reading *The Handmaid's Tale*, students will research the historical and cultural contexts of when this was written, as well as focusing on social movements that inspired this novel.

11.3.R.2 Students will evaluate authors' perspectives and explain how those perspectives contribute to the meanings of texts.

11.3.W.1 Students will compose narratives reflecting real or imagined experiences that: establish narrator(s) that enhance(s) the narrative, include varied syntax to enhance readability, emulate literary elements and/or literary devices from mentor texts

With the final zine creations, students will be writing from the perspectives of the characters from the novel, creating an imagined situation where the Handmaids and others begin to unify their messages to create a social movement that revolts against Gilead.

11.3.W.3 Students will compose argumentative essays, reviews, or op-eds that: introduce precise, informed claims, include a defensible thesis, acknowledge counterclaims or alternate perspectives, organize claims, counterclaims, and evidence in a logical sequence, provide the most relevant evidence to develop balanced arguments, using credible sources, use sentence variety and word choice to create clarity and concision, use style and tone that suits the audience and purpose.

In both the zine and the fictional social movement, students will write speeches, essays, or opinion pieces. They will have to think about how their language and syntax impacts the audience.

11.3.W.4 Students will blend narrative, informative, and argumentative writing to suit their audience and purpose.

The fictional zines will have to blend all types of writing to unify their purpose and message to entice other people to join their oppositional movement to Gilead.

11.6.W.4 Students will present research in longer formats (e.g., sustained research projects, process essays) and shorter, informal formats (e.g., single-day research projects, informal discussion) to a variety of audiences.

At the beginning of the unit, students will do a single day research project with an informal presentation on their chosen social movement.

11.7.W Students will create engaging multimodal content that intentionally enhances understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence for diverse audiences.

Using a variety of spatial and visual elements, students will not only create zines that are creatively presented, they will also create a prezzi that will contain pictures, clips of songs, excerpts of speeches, etc. about their chosen social movement.

Resources

Bibliography for Teachers

Almeida, Paul. *Social Movements*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019.

<https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520964846>. This is a good resource to understand how social movements function and the terminology to use.

Anderson, Sini, et al. *The Punk Singer: a documentary film about Kathleen Hanna*. 2014. Use this documentary to show clips of Kathleen Hanna and actual footage of Riot Grrrls. This will be a powerful source to help get students excited about this particular movement.

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. New York: Anchor Books, 1998.

Atwood, Margaret. *The Testaments*. New York: Anchor Books, 2019. You can bring in excerpts of this sequel to help students better understand social movements. Use these specific passages: Page 45 which shows the propaganda surrounding Baby Nicole. Pages 48-49, 51-52 show protests outside of Gilead.

Boyle, Amy. "'They Should Have Never Given Us Uniforms if They Didn't Want Us to be an Army': *The Handmaid's Tale* as Transmedia Feminism." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 45 (4): 845-870. 06/01/2020. doi:10.1086/707798. This article explains how influential the TV series has become to the Fourth Wave of feminism.

Comstock, Michelle. "Grrrl Zine Networks: Re-Composing Spaces of Authority, Gender, and Culture." *JAC* 21, no. 2 (2001): 383-409. Accessed June 26, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20866409>. This discusses how zines were used to create a network to help unify the message of the Riot Grrrl movement.

The Handmaid's Tale. Created by Bruce Miller. *Hulu*, 2017. You can use powerful clips from the series to help enhance the study of social movements through reading the novel.

Garrison, Ednie Kaeh. "U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologicals of the Third Wave." *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 1 (2000): 141-70. Accessed June 26, 2021. doi:10.2307/3178596. This article has a wealth of information about Riot Grrrls along with images of zines.

Loudermilk, Kim A.. *Fictional Feminism : How American Bestsellers Affect the Movement for Women's Equality*. Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004. Accessed May 1, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central. This book has an interesting chapter about *The Handmaid's Tale* and how it is work that seems pro-feminist, but is really a bleak picture of the feminist movement.

Marcus, Sara. *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*. Harper, 2010. This book uses the biographies of major Riot Grrrl leaders to tell the story of this movement's creation and impact. Again, this book contains photos of Riot Grrrls and their zines that could be used in the classroom.

Moeggenberg, Zarah, PhD. and Samantha L. Solomon PhD. "Power, Consent, and the Body: #MeToo and *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Gender Forum* no. 70 (2018): 4-25.
<https://search.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/power-consent-body-metoo-handmaid-s-tale/docview/2167787956/se-2?accountid=15172>. Another article that explains the connection of the *Hulu* TV series to the #metoo movement.

Rector-Aranda, Amy and Miriam Raider-Roth. "'I Finally Felt Like I had Power': Student Agency and Voice in an Online and Classroom-Based Role-Play Simulation: Association for Learning Technology Journal." *Research in Learning Technology* 23, (2015). doi:<http://dx.doi.org.yale.idm.oclc.org/10.3402/rlt.v23.25569>.
<https://www-proquest-com.yale.idm.oclc.org/scholarly-journals/i-finally-felt-like-had-power-student-agency/docview/2121431919/se-2?accountid=15172>. This article explains the importance and rationale for using simulation and role-play in the classroom.

"Social Action." Accessed June 26, 2021.
<https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/promotion-strategies/systems-advocacy-and-community-organizing/main>. A great website that lists social movement strategies and tactics.

Notes

1. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Created by Bruce Miller. *Hulu*, 2017.
2. Moeggenberg and Solomon, "Power, Consent, and the Body: #MeToo and the Handmaid's Tale."
3. Boyle, Amy. "'They Should Have Never Given Us Uniforms if They Didn't Want Us to be an Army':*The Handmaid's Tale* as Transmedia Feminism," 856.
4. Boyle, Amy. "'They Should Have Never Given Us Uniforms if They Didn't Want Us to be an Army':*The Handmaid's Tale* as Transmedia Feminism," 859.
5. Boyle, Amy. "'They Should Have Never Given Us Uniforms if They Didn't Want Us to be an Army':*The Handmaid's Tale* as Transmedia Feminism," 862.
6. Boyle, Amy. "'They Should Have Never Given Us Uniforms if They Didn't Want Us to be an Army':*The Handmaid's Tale* as Transmedia Feminism," 856.
7. Boyle, Amy. "'They Should Have Never Given Us Uniforms if They Didn't Want Us to be an Army':*The Handmaid's Tale* as Transmedia Feminism," 865.
8. Almeida, Paul. *Social Movements*, 6.
9. *Ibid.*, 6.
10. Almeida, Paul. *Social Movements*, 20.
11. *Ibid.*, 20.
12. "Social Action." Accessed June 26, 2021.
<https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/promotion-strategies/systems-advocacy-and-community-organizing/main>.
13. Marcus, Sara. *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 22.
14. Marcus, Sara. *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 24.

15. Garrison, Ednie Kaeh. "U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologies of the Third Wave," 142.
16. Marcus, Sara. *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 42.
17. Marcus, Sara. *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 120.
18. Garrison, Ednie Kaeh. "U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologies of the Third Wave," 143.
19. Ibid., 143.
20. Almeida, Paul. *Social Movements*, 173.
21. Marcus, Sara. *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 91.
22. Marcus, Sara. *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 321.
23. Garrison, Ednie Kaeh. "U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologies of the Third Wave," 164.
24. Ibid., 154.
25. Ibid., 144.
26. Comstock, Michelle. "Grrrl Zine Networks: Re-Composing Spaces of Authority, Gender, and Culture," 385.
27. Ibid., 384.
28. Boyle, Amy. "'They Should Have Never Given Us Uniforms if They Didn't Want Us to be an Army': *The Handmaid's Tale* as Transmedia Feminism," 858.
29. Marcus, Sara. *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 81.
30. Comstock, Michelle. "Grrrl Zine Networks: Re-Composing Spaces of Authority, Gender, and Culture," 387.
31. Ibid., 394.
32. Rector-Aranda, Amy and Miriam Raider-Roth. "'I Finally Felt Like I had Power': Student Agency and Voice in an Online and Classroom-Based Role-Play Simulation: Association for Learning Technology Journal." *Research in Learning Technology* 23, (2015).
doi:<http://dx.doi.org.yale.idm.oclc.org/10.3402/rlt.v23.25569>.
33. Loudermilk, Kim A.. *Fictional Feminism : How American Bestsellers Affect the Movement for Women's Equality*, 127.
34. Ibid., 127.
35. Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*, 52.
36. Loudermilk, Kim A.. *Fictional Feminism : How American Bestsellers Affect the Movement for Women's Equality*, 127.

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

©2023 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University, All Rights Reserved. Yale National Initiative®, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®, On Common Ground®, and League of Teachers Institutes® are registered trademarks of Yale University.

For terms of use visit https://teachers.yale.edu/terms_of_use