

## Teaching Media Literacy: Songbirds & Snakes

Gamemaker ratings, personal interviews, and tribute sponsorship, all tied together with *mandatory* nationwide viewing. These are all essential elements of The Hunger Games that the Capitol believes necessary to maintain control of the districts of Panem. Despite what readers see in the seventy-fourth and seventy-fifth games, these dystopian events that take place while simultaneously sending twenty-four children to fight for their lives were not always a priority in the Capitol's plan of punishment for district rebellion. Entertainment through media was *not* an emphasis. Yet after the publication of the original novel, *The Hunger Games*, Suzanne Collins gifted readers with the answer to how the games progressed to become the gruesome spectacle that we see in the original trilogy. By examining the portrayal of propaganda, framing of media, and the manipulation of public perception by control of the press in Collins's *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, the novel can be utilized as a tool for teaching media literacy to secondary students, and aid in forming an understanding of how to navigate modern media.

Before exploring the novel's content, one must first come to an understanding of what media literacy consists of and why its presence is crucial in the classroom. De Abreu, author of *Teaching Media Literacy*, defines the concept as "the ability to access, understand, analyze, evaluate, and create media" and specifies that a media-literate person is "proficient in describing the role media plays in her life, she can distinguish the basic conventions of various media, and she enjoys her use of media with mature awareness" (25, 104). When encountering media, the public should analyze its meaning, purpose, and credibility.

To prepare the population for a society that is reliant on media, students must develop sufficient media literacy skills to navigate the world as globally responsible citizens. The American Library Association (ALA) discusses the dangers of not establishing the ability to

evaluate media efficiently: “Information prepackaging... encourages people to accept the opinions of others without much thought. When opinions are biased, negative, or inadequate for the needs at hand, many people are left helpless to improve the situation confronting them.” If students are not taught to recognize potential partiality or unreliable information, they are at risk of adopting the philosophy of others without the vital step of critical thinking. This compliance with accepting information and the inability of citizens to recognize the manipulation of public perception through media is imperative in creating the dystopian world of Panem, which serves as a warning to our current nation.

The ALA describes how an understanding of media literacy is an important part of becoming a responsible citizen in a modern democracy, thus explaining that citizenship “involves a capacity to recognize propaganda, distortion, and other misuses and abuses of information.” By developing a sense of healthy skepticism of media and encouraging students not to blindly accept everything they consume—but instead carefully evaluate the information presented to them—they are likely to create informed opinions on current issues in society, which will lead them to become responsible voters when they reach adulthood. With this in mind, we should be taking time to foster students’ life skills, not purely their academic abilities. To grow our students’ perception of the world around them and adequately prepare them to be dependable citizens of that world, we *must* teach them media literacy skills.

By dissecting Panem's unethical media practices, we open the door for students to comment on the potential shortcomings of the media practices that affect us. Latham and Hollister state that in dystopian societies, “the success or failure of reigning totalitarian governments often depends on their control of information and displays of power. Manipulation of the media allows oppressors to simultaneously spread misinformation as well as intimidate the

oppressed through gruesome reminders of the repercussions that await any citizen who contemplates rebellion or escape,” (34). Near the conclusion of the first third of the novel, the Capitol partakes in some questionable ethics. In *Ballad* Brandy, the female District Ten tribute, is shot and killed after slitting her game mentor—Arachne Crane’s—throat out of anger for the Capitol girl taunting her with food for spectators’ amusement. Arachne’s funeral is covered by Capitol media and accompanied by speeches spewing patriotism. To undermine the fact that Crane’s life was taken by district blood, the Capitol showed power by parading around Brandy’s lifeless body to use as an example of what happens to those who step out of line. Coriolanus remarks, “This was just another chance to remind the districts that they were inferior and there would be repercussions for their resistance” (Collins, 130). This event being broadcast across Panem draws on propaganda tactics by warning others of what will happen to them if they do the same.

This lesson serves the purpose of establishing an understanding in students of ways in which media can be utilized to manipulate an audience in the novel and in the real world. Utilizing direct instruction, teachers will define and provide examples of appeals to fear and emotion, then expand on how these propaganda tactics are used to manipulate public opinion. To check for an understanding of the techniques, teachers will then lead their class in discussion over where the tactics are present in Chapters 9-10 of *Ballad*. The class should be able to identify that appeal to emotion is present when displaying Crane as an exemplary citizen and using her death to fuel the games in the speeches at her funeral, and appeal to fear is seen when Brandy is used as an example of what happens when the Capitol is defied.

To further understanding, educators should use historical propaganda images that utilize appeal to fear and emotion. Following the analysis, students can engage in a critical reflection

that connects the techniques used in these real-world examples to those depicted in the novel. Teachers might prompt students to consider the parallels present and how such techniques manipulate public perception and control a narrative. Students should also be encouraged to reflect on how recognizing these techniques strengthens their ability to navigate modern media critically and to form independent and educated opinions—particularly when engaging in civic duties such as voting for representatives and policies. Finally, teachers can invite students to propose strategies that enhance their awareness of manipulative media tactics and protect them from their persuasive influence.

The recognition of the framing of media is an essential skill in analyzing and evaluating the information within it. Educators can foster an understanding of what is stated and implied by examining song lyrics and exploring their explicit and implicit meanings after diving deeper through research. In the second part of the novel, Lucy Gray sings an original song, “The Ballad of Lucy Gray Baird,” during her interview that is being broadcast across Panem, which has multiple interpretations depending on the audience. The purpose of this lesson is to examine how one piece of media can be interpreted in many ways depending on the audience and framing, brought forth by inferring the different meanings Lucy-Gray’s song holds to different people by citing evidence in the lyrics and reactions from the audience.

Utilizing methods of direct instruction, educators should define key concepts of framing, bias, and audience perception. Teachers should explain that news framing often tailors information to align with a specific agenda or audience, and because the practice is so widespread, it would be wise to approach the media you are consuming with a healthy bit of skepticism. To cultivate this awareness, educators can prompt students to consider whether a source exhibits potential bias or prejudice towards the topic at hand, to analyze the purpose of

the framing and whether it seeks to elevate a particular group or individual, and to evaluate whether details have been selectively omitted or exaggerated to shape public deception. To check for an understanding, teachers would have students watch a primary source video of a current event and then read two current articles reporting on the topic. The class would then work together to dissect the articles, pointing out where their biases might show, what evidence of framing there is, and if either the source itself or the intended audience has an effect on any information that was omitted or exaggerated.

For guided practice, the class will turn to the lyrics of “The Ballad of Lucy Gray Baird” as a primary source text. Teachers will first have students identify and cite key information Lucy Gray has conveyed to the audience within the lyrics. Educators should then split the class into groups representing distinct perspectives—Coriolanus, the Covey, and the Capitol—before rereading the ballad through the lens of their assigned audience. During this activity, students should consider which specific lines might have the greatest impact on their audience and why, as well as how each audience might reinterpret or retell Lucy Gray’s story to serve its own interest by emphasizing, minimizing, or omitting certain details to align with its perspectives or objectives.

Teachers will ask students to respond to the following prompt: “Consider both the articles we evaluated and each group's analysis of character interpretations of Lucy Gray’s song. Why do you think it is important to be aware of potential bias and framing when receiving your news? How might an evaluation of your sources help you become a more well-informed consumer of media? Provide a real-world example of when this skill might be crucial to personal decisions.”

When media is controlled by those without the public’s best interest in mind, it can distort perception and harm society. At the conclusion of *Ballad*, Dr. Gaul explains to Coriolanus

that she has removed all records of the tenth games from history to erase the mistakes that made the Capitol appear too vulnerable. The purpose of this lesson is to foster an understanding of the dangers of erasing someone's story from media and history and to recognize that oftentimes the people in power are the ones who decide whose perspectives get told. Teachers should provide real-world instances of when the voices of minorities or historical events have been erased from media. To check for an understanding upon finishing the novel, educators might prompt students to reflect on why—despite Lucy Gray's title of Victor of the Tenth Hunger Games—she is denied agency on how or if her story gets told; how the suppression of such narratives might influence the citizens of Panem's understanding of their history and, by extension, how similar erasures affect real-world communities whose voices have been silenced; and finally, which groups might stand to benefit from the omission of particular histories or voices. Teachers may close this discussion by explaining that we can identify erasure in media by practicing our media literacy skills and analyzing our sources. When we are aware of who is presenting a narrative, we can consider whether the framing of this narrative benefits the storyteller. We can also ask ourselves if any voices are missing and seek out multiple perspectives to help further inform us on the subject.

To deepen knowledge of the dangers of the manipulation of public perception through media control, students will together create a fictional proposal addressed to Dr. Gaul, arguing on behalf of the erasure of the tenth games, considering why it is to the Capitol's benefit, potential fears they might face if the record is not expunged, and justification of the erasure in relation to the future of Panem. The proposal should be accompanied by a personal reflection of the consequences of erasing someone's story with evidence from the novel and a real-world example.

With an ever-growing media landscape, the demand for explicit media literacy skills being taught in schools is more prominent now than it has ever been. To navigate the real world as responsible and informed adults, teachers must first foster students' understanding of how to effectively interpret media. By using Collins' *The Ballad of the Songbirds and Snakes* to examine propaganda and media control, educators equip students with the literacy skills needed for informed citizenship.

## Works Cited

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