

Mindcrime and Doublethink: Using Music to Teach Dystopian Literature

A high school teacher uses a 1988 concept album from the heavy metal band Queensrÿche to broaden students' connections to Orwell's classic, Nineteen Eighty-Four.

It has become quite clear to secondary language arts educators that in order to reach many of our students in the new millennium, we must delve deeper into our “bag of tricks” than ever before. Lessons and teaching strategies that might have worked 20 years ago may not work today. According to Matt Copeland and Chris Goering, “we cannot be content to settle for what has always worked before. We must strive to incorporate new forms of literacy and popular culture into our classrooms to better prepare our students for the skills life demands” (441). Therefore, it is essential that language arts teachers attempt to incorporate nonprint materials in their classrooms, such as music, film, and art, to involve, engage, and motivate a new generation of students (Calogero; Caswell; Rubin and Melnick; Towell; Whelan).

Of the aforementioned nonprint materials, appropriate and carefully chosen music can play a positive role in the classroom as it is highly engaging to today’s youth (Caswell; Smith and Herring), and it “can be especially beneficial for hard to reach children, who have difficulty learning through traditional methods” (Towell 287). As educators, getting our students to “bite the hook” of our material is a large part of the battle. Once the students are engaged in the lessons that we are teaching, then the learning can begin.

Using music in the classroom has shown to be effective from the elementary school level all the way to the university level (Calogero; Lüke). Using various forms of music, such as the blues (Copeland and Goering; Rubin and Melnick),

hip-hop (Whelan), antiwar (Johannessen), country (Caswell), North African (Vogl), and heavy metal (Lüke), can support and contribute to the discussion of classroom literature in myriad ways. “Music is universal. Listening to music can soothe the soul, excite the emotions, and provide a sense of cultural identity” (Towell 284). Furthermore, by using music when teaching literature,

children learn some of the different ways that ideas and emotions can be expressed creatively. By integrating these various avenues of expression, teachers can build a greater appreciation for art and literature in their students, bringing new ideas, art forms, sounds, and cultures into their lives. (Calogero 23)

It is evident that music applied to literature can be a dynamic classroom tool that has wide-ranging, positive effects on students and which “[evokes] emotion, engagement, and comprehension and promotes learning” (Caswell 63).

Secondary language arts teachers are not playing music in the classroom just for the sake of playing music; it is a tool that supports and facilitates the growing dialogue of high school students. According to Rachel Rubin and Jeff Melnick,

The vast majority of high school and college students listen to music every day. It’s part of their routine, their social life, their group identity. Unlike “high” literature, popular music has not been traditionally cordoned off for an elite group’s pleasure—or burdened by associations of coercion. In short, music seems fun; discussing it, students feel empowered and competent. By using popular

music as an entree to talking about written works, a teacher can transfer some of that sense of cultural ownership to the literature classroom. (31)

Music speaks a language that most, if not all, teenagers seem to understand. I believe that harnessing that connective ability can only add to the energy and atmosphere of the classroom.

Operation: Mindcrime* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four

Queensrÿche is a heavy metal/rock band that hails from Bellevue, Washington. Their third album, *Operation: Mindcrime*, has been praised by both fans and critics alike as one of the best “concept albums” of all time. As a concept album, each song in it contributes to an overall story line and is told in order, from start to finish, just like a “typical” novel. The album, released in 1988, tells a story of mind control and the elusive search for truth. It also addresses the (still relevant) concepts of the fight against government corruption, religious hypocrisy, and self-determination. Commercially, *Operation: Mindcrime* peaked at #50 on the Billboard charts in June of 1988 (<http://www.billboard.com>), and the album eventually went platinum (one million copies sold) in 1991. Further, *Operation: Mindcrime* was ranked at #34 on the *Kerrang!* 100 Greatest Heavy Metal Albums of all time list (<http://www.rocklist.net>). In my opinion, this highly respected album in the world of rock music is also a text worthy for the secondary English classroom. It intelligently and wrenchingly illustrates a story that rivals those of the “classics,” such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Operation: Mindcrime focuses on a young man named Nikki who is brainwashed by the charismatic Dr. X to assassinate corrupt public officials. Nikki only has one person to whom he can turn to when he tries to escape the grasp of Dr. X and that is Sister Mary. Nikki and Sister Mary become very close friends, and Nikki begins to have romantic feelings for her. Nikki soon finds Sister Mary dead, and he honestly does not know if he is the one who murdered her. He eventually has a mental breakdown, is captured by the police, and is kept under surveillance in a state mental facility as the album ends.

George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a story about government control and the leadership’s unflinching grasp over its citizens. Originally

published in 1949, this novel is still taught in secondary schools, both in this country and around the world, because of its powerful depiction of truth, love, power, self-determination, and the struggle of the individual against the government (Ingle). According to the Modern Library 100 Best Novels list, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is ranked as the 13th greatest novel of all time (“100 Best Novels”). To many, it is also the most gripping dystopian novel ever written.

Nineteen Eighty-Four is a futuristic story that takes place in the land of Oceania (modern-day England). The story begins with protagonist, Winston Smith, writing in his diary that he hates the powerful and omniscient leader of Oceania, Big Brother. Winston acts like a perfect member of his middle-class society, called the Party, as he works to rewrite history on a daily basis. He meets a woman named Julia and they begin to have a love affair, which is greatly forbidden by the dictatorial government. Ultimately, Winston and Julia are captured by the Thought Police as they search to find other rebels like themselves. They are tortured and reprogrammed to love Big Brother and the authoritarian system of government under which they live.

I have found teaching these works together has proven an effective way to instruct and engage students.

Teaching *Mindcrime* and *Doublethink*

The class period prior to introducing the *Mindcrime* and *Doublethink* project to my senior-level, British Literature classes, I assigned the students the task of brainstorming and listing as many of the varied themes and concepts from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as they could possibly recall, as well as their modern-day equivalents (e.g., being taken at night by the Thought Police is similar to the act of rendition today). Students were asked to create a list and explain, with specific detail, how each of these ideas was introduced and explained in the novel. I wanted my students to start thinking in this analytical way to prepare for the upcoming in-class portion of the project.

On project day, the students were asked to take out their themes/concepts list, and as a class, we generated a detailed, cohesive list that I had documented on the front board. I then distributed

the Mindcrime and Doublethink project handout, which states:

In this assignment, you are going to explore Queensrÿche's epic concept album, *Operation: Mindcrime*, in order to better understand the complex social, political, and religious issues in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. You will be required to analyze the parallel concepts and themes of these two works with the intent of further developing a critical eye toward injustice, personal empowerment, and the creation of a political consciousness.

I read the assignment over with the class and answered any questions that the students had about

their task of identifying, comparing, and analyzing similar themes and concepts in *Operation: Mindcrime* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as well as explaining my expectations for the completed project. I then handed out a photocopied, full-length cover and lyrics from the CD booklet from *Operation: Mindcrime*. As per my handout, I instructed the students to listen closely to the album—especially the interludes between songs, since they give clues to piecing together the storyline. With my initial lead, the students began their journey of cross-textual analysis beginning by looking at the album cover for *Operation: Mindcrime* (see fig. 1). The representation of collective anger exhibited by both the citizens

The representation of collective anger exhibited by both the citizens of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s Oceania and those on the cover art of *Operation: Mindcrime* drew the students' attention and engaged them in the task of ascertaining the commonalities of the texts.

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FIGURE 1. *Operation: Mindcrime* Cover.

of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s Oceania and those on the cover art of *Operation: Mindcrime* drew the students' attention and engaged them in the task of ascertaining the commonalities of the texts. Students began to see the parallels between the album and the novel, and by looking at both with a critical eye (and eventually, ear), they were able to draw their own conclusions as to why these two texts work so well together, are worthy of being discussed analytically, and relate to government and society today.

After the initial group discussion of the CD cover, I played the entire album for the class. I replayed particular song interludes several times to ensure that the class could hear all the important details (e.g., Nikki answering the phone and hearing the brainwashing cue on the track "Operation Mindcrime"). The students listened to the album as they highlighted lines deemed important as well as taking notes about the scenes between the songs. We listened to the disc for two class periods, with time left over at the end of each period for a class discussion, clarification, and reflection. Then, it was up to the individual students to complete their analysis at home and type it up to be turned in a week later.

Student Analysis

The Mindcrime and Doublethink project was assigned to 75 high school juniors and seniors in my two sections of British Literature. The senior papers of Manuel, Ashley, Yesenia, and Alma represent interesting points for discussion.

As Manuel stated in the introduction to his written reflection, "By reading *1984* and listening to *Operation: Mindcrime*, it is easy to pinpoint every similarity between the two works of art and it's unquestionable that Queensrÿche's album is a dead ringer of George Orwell's *1984*." I am glad that Manuel was able to grasp the closeness between the two texts, since I was hoping that the students would see this for themselves.

One of my greatest pleasures of reading the students' analyses is when they are able to make connections in a way that I had not previously conceived; they use the two texts to create something completely new and fresh. Ashley said:

Big Brother manipulates you to love him and in the album *Operation: Mindcrime* the lyrics are: "Spreading the disease / Everybody needs / but no

one wants to see. / Manipulate the people for the money they pay.” To me, this relates to Big Brother and government control because spreading the disease is like the Inner Party spreading their love for Big Brother. The Love for Big Brother is like a disease you can get. Once you catch a disease it is hard to get rid of it. Once you love Big Brother, you cannot go back to hating him.

I had never thought about Big Brother as a “disease,” yet he is definitely a scourge on his society. Ashley did a nice job of helping me reconceptualize my own notions of Big Brother.

Students were also successful in integrating the major themes and concepts from the novel and the album. Yesenia asserted:

Big Brother is the highest power of all beings; Big Brother is god. When Winston and Julia have forbidden sex in an abandoned church, it shows how religion in all of Oceania has been completely removed. . . . There is also a struggle with religion in *Operation: Mindcrime*. It describes how preachers are taking advantage of members of the church and how they are hypocrites to their own teachings.

Yesenia did a wonderful job of identifying key points in the novel and comparing it to the CD. She showed the ability to analyze and synthesize information in a clear and cohesive fashion.

Developing a “Critical Eye”

As a reflective conclusion to the project, I asked the students to evaluate whether or not *Mindcrime* and *Doublethink* had any value to them academically, politically, and/or personally. Yesenia stated:

Listening to the CD *Operation: Mindcrime* was extremely helpful. It definitely helped me better understand the concepts of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* because I was able to focus on the music in class and I was given time to focus on it. . . . Listening to music in the classroom is great. . . . I feel like I can connect to music better than any other type of learning. Reading confuses me, and writing messes with my actual thoughts. Listening to music has a great academic value for me.

In addition, I wanted the students to reflect on whether they further developed, as I posed in the assignment, “a critical eye toward injustice, personal empowerment, and the creation of a political

consciousness.” My students provided incredibly valuable insight as to the benefits of completing this project. Alma wrote:

Listening to *Operation: Mindcrime* and reading *1984* both have the ability to make you realize that you are not as free as you think you are. . . . Both pieces show how there is a lack of privacy, betrayal, brainwashing, and propaganda used in our society today to be completely controlled by the government. . . . [Our] government . . . uses propaganda to influence our thoughts [and forces us to] believe this is how we should live and that it is what’s right. . . . I believe I won’t be so naive to the system even though we are forced to live by it.

On reflection, Alma felt that she would now view the world more critically and not be so naive about trusting everything that she is told by those in power. She continued by explaining, “Whenever I see a political commercial, debate, article, news story, etc., I analyze [it] in a way that most people wouldn’t. . . . I am [more] critical to anything that the government puts out.” In her assignment, Alma also discussed how she is more alert to political activity around her and has a stronger sense of independence due to her more critical perception of politics and the workings of government.

When asked to discuss what she had learned during the *Mindcrime* and *Doublethink* project, Ashley, already wary of the government, stated:

Unfortunately, I always had a suspicion, and hatred, towards the government and politics. . . . When I did this assignment, it pretty much cleared up why I dislike the government and politics. It actually gave me a much-needed realization of just how horrible government can be. . . . I do think that, after the *Mindcrime* assignment, I am a more critical thinker in terms of politics. I always wonder if what [politicians] are thinking is true or if they are just selling it to get the votes and to get on people’s sides. . . . Anyone who has any type or form of power will abuse it somehow.

Since Ashley already viewed politics and government from a critical perspective, it was not difficult for her to incorporate her understanding of this project into her already existing beliefs. She went on to explain:

I definitely feel stronger knowing what I have learned about politics and government control . . .

if I ever do vote, [I] will search at an in-depth level into what the issue really is and what the long-term effects could possibly be. . . . I think I did get a better understanding about corruption and government, and this is a great strength for anyone to have.

Ashley learned that it is important, as an active citizen, to question authority and dig deeper when politicians and the media present information to the American people. Instead of just “jumping on board” with a politician’s proposal, it is essential that one try to ascertain all sides of the issue and its possible short- and long-term consequences.

In her reflective conclusion, Yesenia wrote that the project


caused many changes in my way of thinking. It opened my mind on how the government can become so powerful, it’s corrupt. I realized that I have to start keeping up with what is going on with the government. . . . Before this assignment I didn’t really care what went on and what didn’t . . . as long as it stayed in Washington, it didn’t affect me. After doing this assignment I realized that’s not exactly how it works. . . . If we want to keep our government from becoming too controlling or from going corrupt, we have to make sure we know and understand what is going on [in Washington].

What’s scary is [when things happen] here in our country . . . like rendition. If we wouldn’t have done this assignment, I would’ve still been ignorant to these kind of things.

Like her peers, Yesenia learned that being an active member of U.S. society means being aware and informed. Just because an issue is decided in Washington, DC, does not mean that there won’t be ripples felt across the country.

Contemporary Issues

The heavy metal album *Operation: Mindcrime* and the classic novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have numerous comparable thematic elements that can be discussed and analyzed in the secondary English classroom. The use of nonprint materials, such as music, can

help students engage with the literature presented and encourage a higher level of literary and socio-cultural analysis than just covering the text alone. And reading novels takes on a new spin for students when they are perceived through a musical perspective. Although *Operation: Mindcrime* was released in 1988, the concepts of corruption and immorality in government and the clergy, a biased media, as well as a fascination with unrequited love are all still relevant today. These issues are just as important now as they were when the album was released. In the same vein, just because *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was written over half a century ago does not mean that it is any less valuable and influential to society today than it was when it was originally published in 1949. With the US government’s recent use of rendition and torture, NSA wiretaps, and almost-endless war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the teaching of Orwell and *Queensryche* seems more important today than ever before. For these reasons, it is essential that students be equipped to look at the world critically and not take everything at face value. If they are encouraged to learn even more via music, all the better. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, author Kurt Vonnegut describes Tralfamadorian literature as "brief, urgent message[s]—describing a situation, a scene"; when seen all at once, the messages produce "an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep" (111–12). In the ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan "A 'Brief, Urgent Message': Theme in *Slaughterhouse-Five*," students use this literary perspective to analyze passages from *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and then apply that perspective by creating a compilation album, CD cover, and liner notes that demonstrate their interpretation, understanding, and evaluation of the themes and ideas in the novel. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/brief-urgent-message-theme-1164.html>

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