Themes and Essential Questions

Chaos and Order
- What is the importance of civilization and what factors support or destroy its fabric?
- What are the positive and negative aspects of both chaos and order?
- What are the responsibilities and consequences of this new world order described as "global"?
- What role does chaos play in the creative process?
- What are the politics and consequences of war, and how do these vary based on an individual or cultural perspective?

Constructing Identities
- How do we form and shape our identities?
- In a culture where we are bombarded with ideas and images of "what we should be," how does one form an identity that remains true and authentic for her/himself?
- What turning points determine our individual pathways to adulthood?
- In a culture where we are bombarded with other people trying to define us, how do we make decisions for ourselves?

Creation
- What is creativity and what is its importance for the individual / the culture?
- What is art and its function in our lives?
- Does a culture / community / institution have the right to censor its artists?

Freedom and Responsibility
- What is freedom?
- Is freedom ever free?
- What is the relationship between freedom and responsibility?
- What are the essential liberties?
- Is liberty and justice for all attainable?
- Should people sacrifice freedom in the interest of security?
- When does government have the right to restrict the freedoms of people?
- When is the restriction of freedom a good thing?

Good and Evil in the World
- Is humankind inherently good or evil?
- Have the forces of good and evil changed over time and if so, how?

- How do different cultures shape the definitions of good and evil?

Heroes and Sheroes
- Do the attributes of a hero remain the same over time?
- When does a positive personality trait become a tragic flaw?
- What is the role of a hero or "sheroe" (coined by Maya Angelou) in a culture?
- How do various cultures reward / recognize their heroes and "sheroes"?
- Why is it important for people and cultures to construct narratives about their experience?
- What is the relevance of studying multicultural texts?
- How does the media shape our view of the world and ourselves?
- In a culture where we are bombarded with other people trying to define us, how do we make decisions for ourselves?

The Human Condition / Spirit
- In the face of adversity, what causes some individuals to prevail while others fail?
- What is the meaning of life?
- What is the meaning of life and does that shape our beliefs regarding death?
- Are we governed/guided by fate, free will, a greater power, or do we fall somewhere on the spectrum between?

Illusion vs. Reality
- What is reality and how is it constructed?
- What tools can the individual use to judge the difference, or draw a line between, illusion and reality?
- What is hypocrisy and what can the individual / subculture / culture do about it?

Language and Literature
- How is our understanding of culture and society constructed through and by language?
- How can language be powerful?
- How can you use language to empower yourself?
- How is language used to manipulate us?
- In what ways are language and power inseparable?
- Is it possible to have culture without language?
- Is it possible to think without language?
- How does language influence the way we think, act, and perceive the world?
- How do authors use the resources of language to impact an audience?
- How is literature like life?
- What is literature supposed to do?
- What influences a writer to create?

- What is the purpose and function of art in our culture?
- How does literature reveal the values of a given culture or time period?
- How does the study of fiction and nonfiction texts help individuals construct their understanding of reality?
- In what ways are all narratives influenced by bias and perspective?
- Where does the meaning of a text reside? Within the text, within the reader, or in the transaction that occurs between them?
- Can a reader infer an author's intentions based on the text?
- What are enduring questions and conflicts that writers (and their cultures) grappled with hundreds of years ago and are still relevant today?
- How do we gauge the optimism or pessimism of a particular time period or particular group of writers?
- Are there universal themes in literature that are of interest or concern to all cultures and societies?
- What are the characteristics or elements that cause a piece of literature to endure?
- What distinguishes a good read from great literature?
- Who decides the criteria for judging whether or not a book is any good?
- What is the purpose of: science fiction? satire? historical novels, etc.?

Love and Sacrifice
- If any, what are the boundaries of love and sacrifice, and where does one draw the line between them?
- What are the factors that move individuals / communities / nations to great sacrifice and what are the consequences?

Nature in the Balance
- What are the responsibilities of the individual / society / superpowers in regard to the health of the environment? (local, regional, national or international context can be used)
- What are the consequences of being unconcerned with nature's balance/harmony?

Our View of the World and Ourselves
- How do we know what we know?
- How does what we know about the world shape the way we view ourselves?
- How do our personal experiences shape our view of others?
- What does it mean to be an insider or an outsider?
- What does it mean to "grow up"?
- Do you believe that things are fated no matter what, or do you believe your actions can change the course of your life?
- Have the forces of good and evil changed over time?

- What is the relevance of studying multicultural texts?
- How does the media shape our view of the world and ourselves?
- In a culture where we are bombarded with other people trying to define us, how do we make decisions for ourselves?
- What turning points determine our individual pathways to adulthood?

Past, Present, and Future
- Why do we bother to study/examine the past, present or future?
- What are the recurrent motifs of history and in what ways have they changed or remained the same?

The Pursuit of Happiness
- What is happiness and what is the degree of importance in one's life?
- To what extent does a culture / society / subculture shape an individual's understanding or concept of happiness?

Relationships and Community
- What are the elements that build a strong friendship?
- How do friendships change over time?
- What impact does family have during different stages of our lives?
- What can we learn from different generations?
- How is conflict an inevitable part of relationships?
- How do you know if a relationship is healthy or hurtful?
- What personal qualities help or hinder the formation of relationships?
- How are people transformed through their relationships with others?
- What is community and what are the individual's responsibilities to the community as well as the community's responsibilities to the individual?

Shades of Truth
- Are there certain truths that can be considered universal or absolute?
- What are the consequences of examining "all of the shades of gray"?
- How does perspective shape or alter truth?

The American Dream

- What is the American Dream and to what extent is it achievable for all Americans?
- In what ways does the American Dream mean different things for different Americans?
- How has the American Dream changed over time?

- What is the perspective of a given nature, culture, or region in regard to the American Dream and what factors create those perceptions?
- What are the responsibilities and consequences of being a "world superpower"?
- Are independence and dependence separable or inseparable?

Culture: Values, Beliefs & Rituals

- How do individuals develop values and beliefs?
- What factors shape our values and beliefs?
- How do values and beliefs change over time?
- How does family play a role in shaping our values and beliefs?
- Why do we need beliefs and values?
- What happens when belief systems of societies and individuals come into conflict?
- When should an individual take a stand in opposition to an individual or larger group?
- When is it appropriate to challenge the beliefs or values of society?
- Are there universal characteristics of belief systems that are common across people and time?
- To what extent do belief systems shape and/or reflect culture and society?
- How are belief systems represented and reproduced through history, literature, art, and music?
- How do beliefs, ethics, or values influence different people's behavior?
- How do individuals reconcile competing belief systems within a given society (e.g., moral beliefs conflicting with legal codes)?
- When a person's individual choices are in direct conflict with his/her society, what are the consequences?
- What is morality and what are the factors that have an impact on the development of our morality?
- What role or purpose does religion / spirituality serve in a culture?
- What purpose or function do ethics / philosophy have in governing technological advances?
- How do our values and beliefs shape who we are as individuals and influence our behavior?

Social Justice

- What is social justice?
- To what extent does power or the lack of power affect individuals?
- What is oppression and what is the root cause?
- How are prejudice and bias created? How do we overcome them?
- What are the responsibilities of the individual in regard to issues of social justice?
- Can literature serve as a vehicle for social change?
- When should an individual take a stand against what he/she believes to be an injustice? What are the most effective ways to do this?
- What are the factors that create an imbalance of power within a culture?
- What does power have to do with fairness and justice?
- Is it ever necessary to question the status quo?
- What are the benefits and consequences of questioning / challenging social order?
- Do we have choices concerning fairness and justice?
- Does labeling and stereotyping influence how we look at and understand the world?
- What does it mean to be invisible? (context: minorities)
- In what ways can a minority keep their issues on the larger culture's "radar screen?"
- Does an institution/culture ever have a right to censor its artists?
- What creates prejudice and what can an individual overcome it?
- What are the causes and consequences of prejudice and injustice, and how does an individual's response to them reveal his/her true character?
- What allows some individuals to take a stand against prejudice/oppression while others choose to participate in it?
- What are the causes and consequences of prejudice and how does an individual's response to it reveal his/her morals, ethics, and values?

Utopia and Dystopia

- How would we define a utopian society?
- Has the concept of utopia changed over time and/or across cultures or societies?
- What are the ideals (e.g., freedom, responsibility, justice, community, etc.) that should be honored in a utopian society?
- Why do people continue to pursue the concept of a utopian society?
- How do competing notions of what a utopian society should look like lead to conflict?
- What are the purposes and/or consequence of creating and/or maintaining a dystopian society?

- Is utopia attainable? At what cost would it be worth attaining?
- By attempting to eradicate disease and disfigurement, are we moving toward or away from utopia?

Adversity, Conflict, and Change

- How does conflict lead to change?
- What problem-solving strategies can individuals use to manage conflict and change?
- How does an individual's point of view affect the way they deal with conflict?
- What personal qualities have helped you to deal with conflict and change?
- How might if feel to live through a conflict that disrupts your way of life?
- How does conflict influence an individual's decisions and actions?
- How are people transformed through their relationships with others?
- What is community and what are the individual's responsibility to the community as well as the community's responsibility to the individual?

Adapted by L. Beltchenko 2007-2008
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