

The Evolution of Dystopian Literature

Mary Baldwin

Ramapo College Honors Program

Dystopian literature has sparked an interest, particularly in teens and adolescents, over the past couple of decades. This phenomenon seems to occur anytime there has been change or controversy in the country's political climate. George Orwell's *1984* is continued to be taught in high schools and colleges all over the country some 70 years after its initial publication and Phillip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* has now become a hit series on Amazon. Both novels feature middle aged protagonists who essentially have no control over their own lives and the world they live in. They also portray countries which have been overrun by political machines, the "Party" of Oceania, and the Japanese and German forces in the United States. These novels are somber, and end with the reader having more questions than answers. No matter how much time passes however, it seems that this kind of dystopian literature continues to impact our society and readers are drawn to it. In recent years, a new genre commonly called "Young Adult" (YA)

The creation of the Dystopian Narrative began in the early 20th century, when attitudes towards human nature and society started to change across the globe. Prior to this period people living in the 16th and 17th centuries, possessed “faith in human progress and in man's capacity to create a world of justice and peace” (Fromm 257). This was one of the “fundamental features” of what was referred to as “Western Thought” and can be traced back to the Greek and Roman thinkers as well as the Old Testament. The first published work of literature pertaining to this idea is Thomas More's *Utopia*, in which he “combined a most penetrating criticism of his own society, its irrationality and its injustice, with the picture of a society which had solved most of the human problems which sounded insoluble to his own contemporaries” (Fromm 258). Therefore, people who lived under the burdens and hardships of the 16th and 17th centuries were actually more optimistic about a better future for mankind than the generations to come.

Although More gave the literary canon the term “utopia” in 1516, the idea of a “utopia or paradise, is much older than that (Sargent). Society had been fantasizing about places in which humanity's problems are obsolete since the beginning of time. The concept of the “utopia” is found in places like “the biblical Eden, Greek and Roman stories of the earthly paradise and the idea of a golden race or age” (Sargent 12). Therefore, authors like More were influenced by these early religious and philosophic texts to create a world where the hardships of the non-existent and where life could be lived happily and justly. With the everyday hardships that individuals faced during this time period, stories and myths like these have well been the only escape from reality.

In the beginning of the 20th century however, perspectives towards human nature began to change.

the European nations in the First World War, managed to “destroy a thousand-year-old Western tradition of hope and to transform it into a mood of despair” (Fromm, 1958). Therefore, perspectives on human nature changed with the events following the First World War, such as the rise of Stalin and an economic crisis all over Europe, created a unanimous sense of doubt that the world could ever get any better. The rise of Hitler and the Nazi party led to the breakout of the Second World War.

dystopian narratives, depict a “world gone wrong,” but instead of through fantasy or future societies, use our own human history to get their message across.

Why *1984* Still Pertains to the Modern Reader

The rise in technology and the industrial revolution created a sense of mistrust of the

Shetty). Despite Snowden bringing forth an

Ministry of Truth, which concerned itself with [altered] news...The Ministry of Peace, which concerned itself with war; the Ministry of Love, which maintained law and order, and the Ministry of Plenty” (Orwell 8). It’s obvious early on in the novel that each of these ministries are hypocritical to their titles, and that they all play a role in maintaining “fear, divisions and disinformation” of Oceania. It’s alarming when the agencies put in place to protect us actually prove harmful, which many current American citizens are afraid of.

The most famous and utterly shocking parallel that people have made between the current administration and Oceania is when Kyanne Conway’s mention of “alternative facts” during a press conference. The media exploded with controversy after this conference, describing the term as a “move reminiscent of the linguistic inventions of Orwell’s Ministry of Truth” (Giroux 23). Not to mention, many speculators have claimed that “alternative facts” is simply an “updated term from what Orwell called ‘doublethink’” (Giroux 23). *Doublethink* is defined as “to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them” (Orwell 32). In the novel, *Doublethink* essentially is used as a tool, for people in his world to

distinctly remembers “it was only four years prior since Oceania had been at war with Eastasia and in alliance with Eurasia” (Orwell 332). Those who know that Oceania was once at war with Eastasia never admit it, and simply accept that Oceania is at war with Eurasia to do otherwise would be too against the Party. In Oceania, the current enemy is the embodiment of “absolute evil” (32), and therefore must be rendered as having always been evil. In reality, the idea of an “absolute evil” is by far improbable, which is why Winston has a hard time grasping at it. We also see this in Dick’s *Man in the High Castle*, when high ranking Japanese and German officials must overcome personal struggles that border the line between “good” and “evil.” A Winston’s character goes to show, doublethink proves to be a difficult task when one possesses a strong conscience and the need for the truth. Winston knows that the party is changing history and falsifying records, as known-

starvation and evisceration of public schools and public universities ensures that the lessons of

also remained consistent

Cold War to display power over one another, but rather gives the reader a second version of alternative history (Gray). The novel is written by a man named "Hawthorne Abenesh" the titular character, who is rumored to live in a "fortress" to protect him from those who are outraged by his work. For the majority of the story, we follow a woman named Juliana, who is travelling with an undercover Nazi, Joseph Minadella, to find the "man in the high castle." *Grasshopper* has been banned in the country and Juliana wishes to see the author, initially oblivious that her partner plans to murder him. In *MHC*, we see how literature such as *Grasshopper* can have such an impact on the public's mind, that governments such as the one's portrayed would not allow it to be read. We have seen this quite often in the past with several books such as *The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger 1951), *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald 1925), and even J.K Rowling's famous *Harry Potter Series*, being banned from schools on the grounds of having inappropriate or questionable content. Much like in *1984*, the limit of words and literature that a person has access to forbids them from opening up their minds to new ideas and perspectives.

Furthermore, *MHC* shows how dystopian governments control their citizens' minds by controlling what they read. By banning what is considered to be a treasonous book, the government in the novel believes that the citizens will be less inclined to rebel. Like *1984*, *MHC* demonstrates how a totalitarian regime will attempt to control the ideas and opinions of its people through restrictions on what they can read. The Japanese Empire and the German Reich fear that a book which dictates a world in which the United States have won the war will influence people to revolt and resist the occupation of the states. In fact, despite the novel being banned through the United States. And in Europe " *Grasshopper* is still described as "popular...Another fad. Another mass craze" (Dick 68), not unlike many of the novels

The Man in the High Castle also dives deep into the question of right and wrong. It seems apparent in the novel, since it is mainly told through the perspectives of Americans Juliana FrankFink, and Robert Childan, that the “enemy” in the novel would be the German and the

impress, and Baynes does nothing to make him think otherwise. However, we also are faced with the reality that Baynes is not the only one. He admits there are in fact several Jews working

so interesting to modern day readers. It does not clearly differentiate between good, bad, right, wrong, but rather plays with the idea that humanity in and of itself is both good and bad, etc.

This holds true ~~til~~ for our politics in the modern ~~day~~ United States. It has been argued that, now more than ever in history, politicians have been making decisions based on partisan politics as opposed to doing what is best for a country as a ~~(whole)~~. It is arguable that Democrats and Republicans in Washington are too busy fighting with one another to get anything accomplished

Our political climate has altered countless times since the publications of *1984* and *The Man in the High Castle*. *1984* and Orwell's other renowned work *Animal Farm* are taught throughout most high schools in the United States as well as are analyzed and studied at the collegiate level. Dick's work, on the other hand, has entered the modern era in a different way, having now been adapted into an Amazon Prime series that currently has three seasons, and is being renewed for a fourth. It seems as if despite all the cultural and political change that has occurred in our country over the past 70 years, people are still interested in dystopian societies and what they represent. However, along with the continued regard for these books, a new kind of dystopian literature has found its way into bookstores and into the mind of several young adult readers.

Nowadays, there has been a growing concern that people of the "millennial generation" have little regard for politics and what was going on in the world. Studies have shown that millennials are less likely than previous generations to show up to the booth on voting day and to be able to name key members of the presidential cabinet and Congress. However, new research has begun to suggest that young people are in fact interested in social and political issues, just not in the typical way. Instead of keeping track of the nightly news, young people have become more interested in dystopian fiction. If you walk into a bookstore now, you're more than likely to find a "'Young Adult Dystopian' section" (Fisher 27), something you probably would not have come across 20 years ago. This new subgenre if you will, has become mainstreamed into our culture, with narratives like *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* series having huge sales and being adapted into movies. *The Hunger Games* in particular was published in 2008, around the time when the financial recession of the late 2000s was hitting the country the hardest. It appears as if this novel and others like it resonated well with young readers

because it “engaged feelings of betrayal and resentment rising in a generation asked to accept that its quality of life will be worse than that of its parents” (Fisher 123). It seems as if since current issues were impacting the lives of young people specifically, they developed their own literary response to it, and the results were massive.

The Young Adult Dystopian narrative uses metaphors to portray problems and concerns arising in everyday society. It seems that this form of literature began trickling into the literary canon following the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001 (Ames). It appears as if these tragic attacks have once again brought this literary genre alive, much like after WWII and the Cold War. However, this new brand of dystopian novels may not be solely influenced by atrocities such as 9/11 but also the aftermath of them. We now live in a society where it is considered normal to be on video multiple times a day, and we essentially have very little understanding of how much information our government can collect from us.

It is no question that societal norms altered after the 9/11 attacks. People can now expect to have their belongings searched at the airport, as well as have to go through metal detectors at border security. We live in a world with ever increasing protection; however when these safety precautions begin to infringe on personal privacy, much like Orwell’s “Big Brother,” our society begins increasingly to reflect the conditions in these novels. The new brand of YA Dystopian novels helps adolescents deal with these situations and pressures in a safe way. It seems that the rise in popularity for YA dystopian fiction comes from “seeking a safe way to explore the

Therefore, these YA dystopian novels portray corrupt governments that are ultimately taken on by a teenager or young adult looking to “find themselves.” The protagonist almost always overcomes a personal struggle while also being able to fight off the corrupt government being represented. These books are certainly entertaining and help build self in young adults but do not necessarily portray the realities of intrusive governments and technologies.

While new dystopian novels such as Suzanne Collin’s *The Hunger Games* and Scott Westerfeld’s “*Uglies*” series have been gaining the spotlight in popular culture, sales for the “classics,” have also spiked in recent years. The *New York Times* article “George Orwell’s ‘1984’ is suddenly a best seller” claims that in 2017, George Orwell’s famous *1984* saw an incredible “surge” in sales, “rising to the top of the Amazon best seller list in the United States and leading its publisher to have tens of thousands of copies printed” (de Freytag Tamura). Therefore, it appears that over the past couple years people have become increasingly interested in early works of Dystopian literature. The article further states that this isn’t just a phenomenon for the U.S., but that sales outside of the United States have also gone up. Furthermore, Phillip K. Dick’s alternative history book *The Man in the High Castle* has also had an increase in sales, and is now adapted into an Amazon television series. Ultimately, people are definitely becoming curious about dystopian literature, and this phenomenon makes us wonder whether our post 9/11 society has helped resurface anxieties about the future world we live in.

There is however, critique of these new Young Adult Dystopian narratives whether or not they live up to the dystopian novels of the past. These narratives typically tend to feature incredibly talented teenagers who are somehow able to overturn the ranks of the totalitarian regime of which they are living under as well as people who are there to control them.

The Hunger Games, for example, Katniss and Peeta are able to change a longstanding tradition

through short, quick means even further questions the legitimacy of our own society and just how dystopian we are.

Alongside sparked interest in novels like *1984* and *The Man in the High Castle*, so has a new, modern genre of dystopian fiction emerged, the Young Adult dystopian novel. These novels, like Collin's *The Hunger Games*, portray young protagonists who, unlike the earlier works, are able to use both moral and mental superiority to outsmart the political regimes that look to suppress them. This new form of dystopian literature arises from a whole generation of millennials growing up in a post 9/11 era, in which they've have to come to the realization that they're lives may not be as fulfilling, or free in any case, as that of their parents. Some critics argue that due to the subtle and overall positive nature of these, that they might not have as long a shelf life as Orwell, but nonetheless these new works of young adult dystopian fiction have still managed to engulf a whole generation of young readers. Overall, dystopian literature has truly changed and altered over the years in many ways but one thing still remains consistent. Readers are still interested in dystopian fiction because it critiques society in a way that other genres of literature simply do not. No matter what form, dystopias use the scariest most un

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