Dystopian Literature
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The dystopian genre of literature relates to stories of an unjust society in which the quality of life suffers as a result of destitution, oppression, or terror. Though these stories normally take place in the future, they are often reflective of contemporary social trends taken to an extreme. The term dystopia was created in direct response to the idea of utopia, which describes an ideal society of peace, harmony, and equality. In some dystopian literature, writers present an apparently utopian setting only to reveal it as secretly dystopian. Dystopian writing is often used in science fiction—many tales involve scientific or technological developments—and by extension speculative fiction, which encompasses all fiction dealing with fantastical and futuristic elements. Dystopian writers often insert themes of politics and religion, usually meant as commentary on real-life historical events. Parallels to contemporary society often contain warnings of tragic consequences. Recurrently, dystopian fiction usually involves an undesirable future brought on by humanity itself.

The genre first emerged in the eighteenth century—many credit Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels as the first semi-dystopian novel—and has since spawned a wide range of works by prominent science fiction authors such as H.G. Wells, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, and Ray Bradbury. Dystopian fiction proliferated throughout the twentieth century in the works of such authors as Philip K. Dick, Anthony Burgess, and Margaret Atwood, and became a favored genre of young-adult writers in the early twenty-first century.

Historical Context
Throughout history, writers have produced many cautionary tales of bad decisions leading to destructive consequences. Scholars could not help but meditate on the possibility of immorality overpowering morality. Some took it upon themselves to make sense of the issue by proposing various solutions. One of the earliest responses to the threat of immorality came from English philosopher Thomas More, who laid out a
solution to the evils of contemporary European society in his 1516 work *Utopia*. A utopian society as explained by More was one of peacefulness, nobility, toleration, equality, and general harmony in all human actions. Three hundred years later, English philosopher Jeremy Bentham would counter More’s work with what he designated *cacotopia* (the prefix *caco-* meaning “the worst”)—a badly governed society filled with deceitfulness and subjugation. The word eventually evolved into *dystopia,*—*dys-* meaning “bad” in Greek—a term coined by English philosopher John Stuart Mill in 1868. Dystopian literature grew out of criticism of utopian ideals, which many academics derided through satire. Instead of trying to come up with an ideal form of society, as utopian literature did, dystopian texts focused on dreaming up a future in which society tragically pays for its negligence. Writers usually express anti-utopian sentiments as a direct response to the contemporary society surrounding them, much as More did when constructing his *Utopia*. Some works included a cautionary message, implying that the real-world social constructs mirrored in the text would inevitably lead to a dystopian future if allowed to continue.

Dystopian texts grew in number throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as writers became more critical of culture. Some of the most significant dystopian literature was produced from the 1930s through the 1960s and was inspired by political and social situations such as the impact of industrial technology, the totalitarianism of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Soviet Union, and advances in nuclear weaponry. The Nazi and Stalinist regimes of the 1940s and 1950s were a primary source of inspiration for dystopian writers of the time. Several of the genre’s most important works are reflective of these oppressive political systems. Concerns regarding the industrial revolution and advancing technology were manifested in the works of H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, and George Orwell, who envisioned futures in which machinery had become detrimental to human nature. Though writers continued to build upon the consequences of events such as political corruption and nuclear war, they also began to take the focus off of the technological aspect of industry and dwell more on the environmental impact of humans, as well as diminishing natural resources. Dystopian literature became abundant during the late twentieth century, with writers of popular fiction including Margaret Atwood and Cormac McCarthy spinning their own modern tales of dystopia. Young adult writers including Suzanne Collins and Veronica Roth also gave the genre another boost in popularity with their twenty-first century teenage trilogies *The Hunger Games* (2008) and *Divergent* (2011).

**Literary Themes**

The most common motif of dystopian literature is political oppression. Political strife is central to many of the most important dystopian works, including Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1931), Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), and Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). Rulers of dystopian universes are often brutal and tyrannical, creating a need for resistance, usually instigated or extended by the work’s protagonist. An emphasis on politics is usually a writer’s satirical response to some real-world political condition the author considers potentially disastrous. Politics also extends into the economic themes of many dystopian works, where class warfare has resulted in a distinct divide between the rich and the poor and individuals must conform to strict government policy. Some works, such as Ayn Rand’s novella *Anthem* (1938), construct
futuristic societies in which government has stripped humanity of its individualism altogether, enforcing a narrow, emotion-free lifestyle. Any character straying from the accepted norm is met with vicious punishment. In Roth’s *Divergent* trilogy, those who do not fit within an established faction, such as a warrior or a scholar, live on the fringes of society. Collins’s *Hunger Games* trilogy imagines a society in which one’s future is determined entirely by the geographical region in which a person is born.

Religious themes are also apparent in many dystopian works, with oppressors utilizing a set of religious principles to assert authority over the masses. Important works of fiction involving religious tyranny include Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986), Huxley’s *Brave New World*, and, in some respects, Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (1924), which uses various analogies to symbolize organized religion. In each work, the reader is confronted with a society controlled by an extreme dogmatic organization that manipulates faith to enforce obedience.

Another theme often seen in dystopian literature is the rebellion of nature against mankind. Conservation of Earth’s natural resources has been a concern for many years. Dystopian authors have often used this awareness as a plot device, taking abuse of nature to such an extreme that it results in mankind’s destruction. Some works use the idea of nature differently, with oppressors banishing contact with nature to further discourage interest of things outside their realm and to retain greater control of society.

**Major Works and Authors**

One of the earliest instances of dystopian literature is Jonathan Swift’s 1726 classic *Gulliver’s Travels*. Though most do not immediately identify this tale as dystopian in nature, Swift wrote his work as a satire critiquing contemporary society. He includes a dystopian twist at the end when Gulliver realizes that humans are no better than the savage Yahoos he encountered on his journey. The dystopian model further developed in 1872 with Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon*, which introduced the idea of machines developing consciousness and therefore becoming a threat to society—a theme that has recurred in countless dystopian works. By the late nineteenth century, writers such as Wells were putting their spin on the dystopian universe. His novella *The Time Machine* (1895) not only satirized the bad habits of Victorian society, but also dealt with the consequences of futuristic technology. As one of the earliest authors of dystopian literature, Wells was a prominent figure in the development of the genre.

Huxley’s *Brave New World* was an important cornerstone in the dystopian universe. Huxley’s narrative predicts a future in which people are reproduced by means of technology. Human emotion and intimacy are therefore eliminated and the harmony of society is dependent upon a strict class system. This technology is also used to brainwash society into believing this lifestyle is right and true. Huxley’s tale, inspired by the growing consumer culture brought on by the industrial revolution, compares life to an assembly line. Mass-produced, disposable goods were becoming commonplace in his time. In Huxley’s book, people are a part of a World State, which worships Henry Ford, the industrialist who was a proponent of the assembly line business model.

Orwell produced several notable dystopian tales in the 1940s, including *Animal Farm* (1945), an allegorical novel about a group of revolutionary farm animals reflective of the political corruption of Stalinist Russia. He continued to illustrate his outrage with
Stalinism in the 1949 classic *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which is often compared to Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Orwell focuses more on the threat of ubiquitous government control and was greatly influenced by Stalinist policies of that era, with the omnipresent Big Brother and Thought Police representing the Soviet Union’s dictatorship and secret police.

Bradbury’s 1953 novel *Fahrenheit 451* parallels the censorship policies of Nazi Germany and the McCarthy era in the United States, though Bradbury noted it was mainly written in response to his worries that technology would create an illiterate society. The novel describes a world in which dissention from the norm is punishable by death, and any literature that disagrees with government policy is forbidden; if it is found, it is burned. The title refers to the temperature at which paper burns.

Prolific novelist Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is set in a futuristic world ruled by a Christian theocracy. Atwood’s novel forecasts a state governed by a religious order that subjugates women. An active feminist, Atwood invented a future in which the feminist movement has failed and women are merely reproductive vessels dominated by the wealthy male elite.

Many popular novelists, including Philip K. Dick, Anthony Burgess, Arthur C. Clarke, Kurt Vonnegut, and Isaac Asimov, have tried their hand at dystopian fiction. The genre saw a further surge in popularity with young adult writers in the early twenty-first century. Collins’ *Hunger Games* trilogy and Roth’s *Divergent* trilogy told stories of futuristic societies controlled by oppressive governments. Collins was inspired by both the ancient Greek myth of Theseus—in which young people were offered as an annual sacrifice to the Minotaur in its maze—and modern culture including reality television programs such as *Survivor* and the immediacy of war coverage broadcast from the front lines. These best-selling series were also adapted into popular film franchises.

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