

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

# Someone Might Be Watching — An Introduction to Dystopian Fiction

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*Dystopian stories are commonplace in our society today. In this informational text, Shelby Ostergaard discusses the characteristics of dystopian fiction and how the genre comments on society. As you read, take notes on themes commonly found in dystopian fiction.*

[1] Walking through carnivals, we love to laugh at the versions of ourselves that appear in the funhouse mirror. We delight in taking selfies with filters that artificially bulge out our noses or shrink our mouths. But sometimes these distortions<sup>1</sup> take on a deeper meaning and force us to notice things about ourselves. You don't notice that your nose is a little large until you take a picture with that filter and compare. The version of yourself in the mirror shows you things about yourself.



*"One Nation Under CCTV" by Tom Blackwell is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.*

Dystopias are usually constructed through this type of magnification. But the subject matter goes far deeper than noses and lips. Authors take troubling aspects of their own society and imagine a world where they are taken to the extreme. The 21st century tendency to over-document through the use of technology becomes a compulsion<sup>2</sup> acted out through a literal recording of our memories. An invasive state becomes one that criminalizes thoughts. A love of reality television and a saturation<sup>3</sup> of violence becomes a society where teens are forced to fight to the death for entertainment. Because of how they are constructed, dystopias are often seen as a desperate warning sign. The truth is, dystopian fiction presents a funhouse mirror of our collective selves. It forces the audience to stare, transfixed,<sup>4</sup> at the small flaws which, in the mirror, have become pronounced enough to produce a monster.

## HISTORY OF DYSTOPIAS

The term dystopia stems from another word: utopia. The English word utopia comes from the Greek "ou-" (οὐ) meaning "not" and "topos" (τόπος) meaning "place." It translates literally to 'no place', or nowhere. Thomas More coined the term in 1516 when he published a book that described a perfect fictional island society. He titled the book Utopia to emphasize that he was describing a made-up place that he considered perfect. The perfection that More, and other philosophers who wrote about utopias, imagined was never intended to be real. Philosophers from More to Plato understood that the perfection they wrote about did not exist in reality, it was 'no place.'

1. **Distort (verb):** to twist something out of its original shape, form, or meaning
2. **Compulsion (noun):** an irresistible urge to behave in a certain way
3. **Saturate (verb):** to fill up completely with something
4. **Transfix (verb):** to make someone motionless with awe or terror

If you think of dystopian literature as holding up a funhouse mirror to society, you can also think of utopian literature as retouching a photo of society. The overly perfected image is less concerned with reality than with showing us an unobtainable perfection.

- [5] But, by the 1900s, for the first time in human history, perfection like that seemed possible for society. Technological advances had spurred on the industrial revolution. Philosophers and politicians saw this automation<sup>5</sup> and, for the first time, a vision of a world without difficult, toiling, physical labor seemed not only possible, but likely. Economic theories envisioned a world without staggering class inequality or crippling poverty. At the turn of the century, the predominant view was that humanity constantly progressed. History was seen as one long forward march that would lead, inevitably, to perfection. However, throughout the 1900s, no matter how much humanity progressed, perfection was never achieved. The promises of technology and sociopolitical<sup>6</sup> theory only resulted in war, poverty, famine, and chaos.

As the century progressed, authors began to question the idea that societies should be attempting perfection at all by writing dystopian fiction. Dystopia stems from two Greek words that translate to 'bad place.' It describes a fictional setting that the author finds horrifying. But, unlike other genres, dystopias prod the audience into examining contemporary political and social structures. Dystopian authors argued that the pursuit of perfection will inevitably lead not to 'no place' but to a 'bad place', because of flaws within the system. And they made it their business to use fiction to hold up funhouse mirrors to magnify those flaws and force discussion about them.

## COMMON THEMES AND STYLISTIC CHOICES

Since two of the most famous dystopian novels, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World*, first gripped the world, their themes have been successfully reproduced in other wildly successful dystopias, like *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Hunger Games*. The success of TV shows like *Black Mirror* and video games like *BioShock* reflect our continued fascination with the worst paths our society could take. Both famous and lesser known dystopian works of art have common themes and stylistic choices.

George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is arguably the best known dystopian novel. It was written in 1949 as a description of what the year 1984 could look like if totalitarianism<sup>7</sup> were allowed to continue. Orwell describes a province of Oceania (formerly known as Great Britain) as an industrialized wasteland, dirty and rigidly controlled by a political regime known as the Party. He magnifies disturbing trends he saw in his own time, like surveillance,<sup>8</sup> government control, and industrialization<sup>9</sup> to show how negative they were. Despite the promise that people in his own time saw, Orwell pointed out the flaws these ideas had. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and other dystopias that examine surveillance, magnify how people act differently when someone is watching. As technology allows for the constant possibility that someone might always be watching you — whether it's the government, your friends, or your family — and that you might act differently in response to this. If it is possible to be under surveillance at any time, people act as if they are always under surveillance. Dystopias often magnify this idea to show how surveillance erodes freedom.

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5. the use of machines and automatic equipment in a production process
  6. **Sociopolitical (adjective):** relating to the combination or interaction of social and political factors
  7. absolute and total control by the state
  8. **Surveillance (noun):** the careful and continuous watching of a person or group
  9. **Industrialization (noun):** the process by which the economy of a region shifts away from agriculture and toward manufacturing

Another common theme in dystopian fiction revolves around the downside of human intervention in health and genetics. Throughout the entirety of history, humans have suffered from illness and poor health. Sometimes this occurs in huge bursts, such as the Spanish Influenza in 1918, which killed more people than WWI. More often it is a simple result of aging. However, scientists now believe that the first person who will live to 150 has already been born and that the eradication<sup>10</sup> of diseases like cancer and influenza are within our reach. In addition, genetic research offers the possibility of eliminating killers like heart disease and chronic diseases like asthma. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and the 1997 movie *Gattaca* explore the possibilities of this type of progress. Both examine themes around what happens to humanity when too many natural obstacles are removed, or when genetic engineering can eliminate flaws. *Brave New World*, and other dystopias that examine health and genetics, magnify what happens when humans don't face natural problems and when differences in genetics are treated as differences in destiny.

- [10] Dystopian literature also often chooses to magnify the perils<sup>11</sup> of misinformation. Characters in dystopias are often told incorrect information about history by their governments or their society. For example, most of the characters in *The Hunger Games* have an incorrect understanding of what life in the other Districts is like. Characters in dystopias are often given incorrect information and isolated from anyone they could confirm or discuss the information with. People in our world are also often given poor information and are too isolated to investigate the information. Dystopian literature highlights why this is a problem. Because of the information they are given, characters in dystopias act differently. They can be convinced to hate people they have things in common with or to be happy with the meager life they have because they are convinced it is far better than what existed in the past. In dystopian literature, misinformation helps to keep inefficient and unfair systems in place because characters are convinced that they are efficient and fair.

A final theme in dystopian literature is lack of individuality. One of the most striking images from *The Handmaid's Tale* is the dress code. Women are forced to wear outfits that correspond to their social status, and no one is given any choice. In some dystopias, the lack of choice is enforced by the government. In others, it is enforced by friends and social codes or enforced through a corporation, like in the 2008 movie *Wall-E*. Authors of dystopias who imagine a world without individuality are concerned with the idea that the wisdom of the crowd can stifle the wisdom of the individual. Authors often choose to magnify this trait by emphasizing lack of choice in simple items, like clothing, food, or toothpaste. This showcases lack of choice and individuality in larger areas, like family structure or careers.

Dystopias tend to have common themes and styles because they reflect the society that we live in. Surveillance is frequently a theme in dystopian literature because we are continually worried about it. The dark side of too much health and genetics research is a common theme because technology furthers the possibilities of genetics and health research every day. Misinformation, totalitarianism, and lack of individuality are all problems that exist in the world that authors are writing in. Dystopias are the dark side of our dreams. There are common themes and stylistic choices because all of the distorted mirrors that authors are holding up are trying to show us the same things. They are trying to give us the same warnings — what the world might look like if we take our quest for perfection too far.

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10. **Eradicate (verb):** to remove or destroy completely  
11. **Peril (noun):** serious and immediate danger

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies the author's main claim in the text?
  - A. Dystopian fiction exaggerates existing problems in our reality to show readers what could happen if society continues down a certain path.
  - B. Both utopian and dystopian fiction are used to warn readers about the risks of attempting to alter a society in any way.
  - C. While dystopian fiction is entertaining to read, it doesn't reflect realistic concerns with our current society, or a possible future society.
  - D. Both Utopian and dystopian fiction are used to distort reality to the point in which it is no longer recognizable or realistic.
  
2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "Walking through carnivals, we love to laugh at the versions of ourselves that appear in the funhouse mirror." (Paragraph 1)
  - B. "The perfection that More, and other philosophers who wrote about utopias, imagined was never intended to be real." (Paragraph 3)
  - C. "Dystopian authors argued that the pursuit of perfection will inevitably lead not to 'no place' but to a 'bad place', because of flaws within the system." (Paragraph 6)
  - D. "Women are forced to wear outfits that correspond to their class, and no one is given any choice. In some dystopias, the lack of choice is enforced by the government." (Paragraph 11)
  
3. How does the author's discussion of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* contribute to the text (Paragraph 8)?
  - A. It proves how unrealistically dystopian fiction portrays social and political issues.
  - B. It gives examples of how dystopian fiction is based on what the author observed in reality.
  - C. It shows how our society can avoid becoming the world depicted in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.
  - D. It stresses how inevitable it is for our society to become the society depicted in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

4. How does the description of the 1900s in paragraphs 5-6 help us understand the qualities of dystopian literature?

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5. How does the author use the analogy of “funhouse mirrors” to help readers understand dystopian fiction?

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## Discussion Questions

**Directions:** *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Have you ever read a dystopian novel, or seen a dystopian film? What about the book or film made it a form of dystopian fiction? How did it affect you and your perception of society?
2. In the context of this text, how does dystopian fiction present the power of fear? How could dystopian or utopian fiction be used to manipulate readers?
3. In the context of the text, what will the future look like? Are either dystopian or utopian texts realistic possibilities for the future? Why or why not?
4. In the context of the text, what are the costs and benefits of technology? Why do you think dystopian fiction focuses on the costs of technology? Do the costs of technology outweigh the benefits?
5. In the context of the text, can we control our fate? Do you think authors of dystopian fiction believe that their writing has the ability to change the course of human progress? How does dystopian fiction impact the future?