# A STUDY IN DYSTOPIAN FICTION

by

Harley Ferris

ENGL 487

Independent Study

Dr. Clines, Advisor

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Ι.	Introduction	1
	II.	Definition	2
	III.	Themes	4
	IV.	External Dystopia	14
	V.	Internal Dystopia	19
	VI.	Concl usi on	24
Aŗ	opendi	x A: Signs and Portents	27
Αŗ	opendi	x B: Works Studied	30

### I. INTRODUCTION

Big Brother. Soma. Cyberspace. Words and ideas spawned from the texts of dystopian fiction have permeated modern culture, and in many ways, helped define it. A young man in a bowler hat with eye makeup, cane and cod-piece is a common fixture at Halloween parties, thanks to Stanley Kubrick and his film adaptation of Anthony Burgess' "A Clockwork Orange." Many are aware that paper burns at 451 degrees Fahrenheit, not because of science class, but instead owing to Ray Bradbury's novel. While valuable for their storytelling and entertainment,

#### II. DEFINITION

The term "utopia" was coined circa 1516 by Thomas Mbre. Literally meaning "no place", it describes an island where everything is perfect. A "dystopia", then, would be a negative utopia, a place in which everything is imperfect. There is some debate between the terms "dystopia" and "anti-utopia". Generally, a dystopia does not pretend to be good, as in the case of "1984" and "Anthem". An anti-utopia would, however, claim to be truly in the business of providing happiness for their citizens, as in the case of "The Giver" and "We". For the purposes of this study, the term dystopia will be used to cover all works and themes presented and discussed.

A dystopian society is ruled by group with a private agenda shrouded in euphemisms or outright lies. This group will use conditioning or coercion to maintain their rule, which often mirrors such real-world systems as communism, Apartheid, and the Roman Catholic Church. The controlling group regulates most aspects of the individual's existence, everything from one's daily routine to their family unit and career. The individual is not important as anything more than a part of the whole. As long as the status quo is maintained, the individual is typically safe, anonymous in the crowd.

As conflict is necessary in storytelling, no dystopian work would be complete without dissention. It may be one person or a

group, and there will often be an event in a main character's experience that reveals the rift between the way things are and the way things might be better. Common devices for this event are missing a dose of emotion suppressants, seeing the hidden inner workings of the ruling system or the discovery of forbidden elements from ages past. This awakening will give rise to a spirit of individualism, an awareness of human rights, and the knowledge that all is not as it seems and must be brought to light and, if possible corrected.

As with much of literature, the ending may either be positive or negative; it is the journey that matters. The message of the work can often be more easily delivered if the hero suffers a tragic end at the hands of the society, and many of these works offer this feature. In this way, many dystopian works read as morality tales, aimed at pointing out flaws of the present and extrapolating them into the future. There is little left for readers to sort out; they know which side is right and which side is wrong. What is left to interpret is where to align the stereotypes in the contemporary societies and systems.

In short, a dystopian fiction centers on a dissenting person or group in a supposed perfect society, awakened to inhumanity and willing to affect a change. Using this definition, the authors of these works have provided each human being with instructions for recognizing and overcoming such systems in their own life.

### III. THEMES

There are five major themes that this paper will identify and review: pluralism versus individualism, chaos versus order; the precision of language; war versus peace; and humanity.

### Pluralism versus Individualism

Much of early dystopian literature points to literal totalitarianism and communism seen on the rise by authors. Zamyatin and Rand both grew up in Russia watching Stalin take power, and as a result, "We" and "Anthem" have direct correlations to a collective form of government, taken to extremes for the purposes of satire and storytelling. Later works such as Orwell's "1984" borrow heavily from these early novels, for while Stalin fell, many have continued to see the danger signs of collectivism and oligarchy creep into more recent politics. Certainly, Hitler used a similar approach with his Nazi propaganda to guide young minds, mirror in "1984" in the forms of the Youth League and Hate Week.

The idea of collectivism is taken to extreme in these works through the education of the masses that they are not important as anything more than parts of the whole. They exist only to serve the State, and anything that benefits the State should benefit them, not the other way around. Needs are more or less provided in return for services to the State in the form of jobs, but careers are typically assigned and one does one's work

without question. Working hard is expected, but ambition for personal gain is squashed. Ambition must only be for the progress of the State.

To reinforce the concept of parts of the whole, many works describe people as numbers, either by simply replacing the term "people" with "numbers", or by actually making their name a number, in whole or in part.

Of all these works, "Anthem" speaks against this more than the others. Rand removes singular pronouns from the language of the people, so Equality 7-2521 says "we" instead of "I", "our" instead of "my", and so forth. The story ends positively, as Equality and his lover escape from the society and live in the mountains, isolated from the State, starting their own society that will celebrate what they believe to be the most powerful word in the world: EGO.

It is not simply enough, however, to suggest that each should run away from all forms of government or system and live independently. Rand begins with this as a matter of necessity, but as Equality describes his plans for raising a family, it is clear that he intends a new community built on interdependence, rather than independence. He suggests that man finds strength in numbers, but numbers must not be man's only strength.

In every dystopian work, the protagonist has at least one helper, if not an entire structure of people to provide a sort of underground rebellion. This proves the idea that people were

not meant to function outside of community, while the theme of the work asserts that neither are people meant to simply be teeth in the gears of the machine.

### Chaos versus Order

Seemingly all of these stories take place in what is to be the future, and the design of the community is commonly the same. Quite often, there is a theme of mathematics. Buildings are squared, streets are straight, life is regulated by a chart, and there is little room for the unexpected. "We" goes so far as to feature an equation for every situation so that a proper happiness coefficient may be derived. There is typically little color, people often wear matching clothes, and even hair (when it is not shaved) is typically the same.

The purpose for this mass regulation is twofold. First, it

There is also commonly a great lack of nature. Animals are

a religion of the State, in which the leader of the State is worshiped, or even the very State itself. If one is to believe in a deity beyond the State, then one may claim to be bound to laws that are higher than the State. This provides an uncontrollable variable that the State must not allow, and as a result, there is no freedom of religion. Either there is a State religion, or no religion.

The other reason there would be no need of religion in a dystopia is found in considering the purpose of religion. All religions are man-made systems intended to explain a reason for existence and a pattern for living. A thoroughly dystopian government will make it clear that the individual exists to serve the state. The government will also have regulated every aspect of a person's life, so a pattern of living will also be clear. If a one understands why and how one exists, there is no need for religion.

In the matter of sex, authors take different paths but arrive at the same place. Some societies promote rampant sexual activity, while others entirely repress it, often through medication. In either case, the end result is to squash the longing for any particular person. This would also present a variable that might cause an individual to follow a law of the heart, rather than a law of the State.

It is also very rare for a couple (when there is coupling) to decide on their own to have a child. Children are typically

born in a laboratory, or there are birth mothers that are merely baby-makers; the resulting child does not have an emotional attachment to anyone. "Children of Men" presents a unique dynamic, in that mass sterility has plagued the planet. Despite the eliminated risk of pregnancy, sexual activity decreases. Author P.D. James suggests that part of the appeal of sex is that the couple is, at the very least, mimicking the ability to create life, and that is what contributes to its power.

### The Precision of Language

From a linguistic standpoint, dystopian literature often provides an additional lens to view the story and its theme. In some works, most notably in "A Clockwork Crange", the author sets up a new way of speech. Anthony Burgess is quite famous for his invention of "Nadsat", the language spoken by the youth in his novel. Burgess observed the youth of his day taking slang and words from other countries, and imagined a setting where the language drew from Russian words, rhyming slang and references to Shakespeare and the King James Bible. In creating this unique dialect, he not only contributed to the future-tense setting of the novel, but also demonstrated through language the difference between the youth and adults. chm Loitgponut, i eblens to wo; t

his language is perfectly understandable to the reader. In the story, however, it draws a line between the two classes (youth and adult), limiting their ability to communicate with definite language.

Another linguistic study could be made of "Newspeak" in Orwell's "1984". An entire section of The Party is devoted to revising the language in the name of efficiency, but the actual purpose is to remove definitive language from speech. By shrinking the language, making words apply in multiple situations, and the paradoxical definitions of terms such as "doublethink" (believing two contradictory thoughts to be simultaneously true), it becomes impossible to be truly clear about anything.

"The Giver" presents an opposite side of that coin, in which the precision of language is essential to good communication in the society. The character Jonas is introduced pondering the correct word to define his feelings, finally settling not on "nervous" as he initially thought, but "apprehensive". Lois Lowry keeps this theme at the forefront, turning it around when Jonas discovers the concept of love and asks his parents if they love him. They are unable to respond and chastise him for using such antiquated and ambiguous language. The concept of love is simply too intangible and the dystopia is not set up to measure it.

In "Anthem", the character Liberty expresses frustration at her inability to convey her feelings to Equality, due to the lack of singular pronouns.

Today, the Golden One stopped suddenly and said:

"We love you."

But they frowned and shook their head and looked at us helplessly.

"No," they whispered, "that is not what we wished to say."

They were silent, then they spoke slowly, and their words were halting, like the words of a child learning to speak for the first time:

"We are one . . . alone . . . and only . . . and we love you who are one . . . alone . . . and only."

We looked into each other's eyes and we knew that the breath of a miracle had touched us, and fled, and left us groping vainly.

This frustration is echoed in many of the dystopian works as the characters struggle to make sense of their emotions and ideas in a society that worked to scratch out all avenues of personal expression. Language is vital to communication, and the less capable a human is to communicate, the less communion and intimacy one can experience with another, leaving the State as the only true object of affection in the person's life.

### War versus Peace

In these stories, the situation of war or peace is typically a concern, but it makes little difference which is a

nothing. Again, the particular side does not matter, as long as it is complete. Physical needs may be entirely met, as in "Brave New World", or constantly short in supply, as in "1984", but in both cases, the individual's focus remains on those needs. Evolutionary theory indicates that creatures turn their focuses to higher matters when basic needs are met, so in the case of the former, there must be a mechanism in place to make the devices that meet needs more and more impressive, so technological advancements are applied to these industries. Regardless, the aim of the government must be to keep the people busy, either through structure, abundant pleasure, or constant want.

Instincts, particularly sexual ones, are often repressed by medication. Rights are limited and privacy is minimal. The nature versus nurture idea is put to the test as the government creates an individual's reality from birth, controlling everything through nurture, creating a perfectly predictable human being.

Zamyatin, in keeping with the satire of "We", creates a situation where the government praises the machines and robots as perfect, distinguishable only from humans by one thing: imagination. As an effort to achieve perfection, doctors have found the location of imagination in the brain and all are invited to "hurry to the auditorium where the Great Operation is being performed."

### IV. EXTERNAL DYSTOPIA

If a dystopia is defined as a society ruled by an authoritative power that presents itself as beneficial while masking a negative agenda, there are certainly many parallels worth exploring, whether in governments, religions, or organizations.

Concern of the loss of personal freedom in America is at an all-time high. It must also be observed that flexibility and freedom should not be confused. Easy access to information on the Internet concerns flexibility, while the limits on such information concerns freedom. Internet service providers are regulated by the FCC, a government organization. became ubiquitous and drove down patronage of the US Postal Service, the government began discussing possible ways to regulate email. Journalists have enjoyed certain privileges under the First Amendment which are not being fully extended to online journalists, as in the case of Josh Wolf, who was imprisoned for not giving a videotape to the FBI. They asserted he was not a true journalist and therefore not protected by the Rights of Press. The case was eventually dropped, but not before Wolf spent over 200 days in prison.

The terror events in New York on September 11, 2001, led to the US government imposing unprecedented levels of constitutional infringements, both in legislation passed and

Many retailers now offer a card that tracks purchases and spending habits. The user receives coupons from time to time based on the spending tracked with that card. Initially, this appears to be a pleasant convenience, but some could feel nervous about this sort of tracking. In a similar way, search engines such as Google keep track of every search made in their application, for the purposes of improving results. As the results are displayed, however, relevant advertisements appear in the margins of the page. This has been brought into their email service, Gmail. The advertisements are based on the actual content of the emails themselves. While Google asserts that no one is specifically reading the email to find appropriate advertising, the work instead being done by a computer, it shows how simple it would be to take the next step and monitor a person's activities. As online activities increase in width and depth, email is more frequently used for receipts from purchases, utility bill statements and payments, job searches, real estate hunts, companionship services like Match. com and eHarmony, in addition to personal correspondence.

Yet another example would be the media, which, according to surveys, people generally distrust. Ratings, however, combined with an increase in dedicated news programs and even dedicated news networks, indicate otherwise.

One of the most famous organizations that has been worked into dystopian literature is the Roman Catholic Church. The

Protestant Reformation brought to light centuries of the controlling nature of the Church through fear and the guarding of the Bible. Priests alone read the Scriptures; priests alone

### V. INTERNAL DYSTOPLA

The most dangerous form of dystopia is the kind the one sets up in one's own mind. An internal system motivated by fear, misinformation, manipulation and isolation will cripple a society from within even more effectively than through political means. While a political or military structure may impose an oligarchy, there will always be dissent, even if just the quiet belief that the system is wrong. What makes the dystopia complete, however, is the collective agreement from citizens that things are as they should be. If this internal conclusion is made, even without a totally corrupt ruling power, it is, in some ways, as if that power is already in place.

At one end of the spectrum, a dystopia would preach the value of full collectivism, where any life is only for the purpose of serving the State. At the other end, there is the rugged individualism modeled by Equality (turned Prometheus) in Rand's "Anthem", where he literally finds a shack in the woods, completely departed from all society but his own.

It is important to observe that not a single protagonist in these stories succeeds without the help of at least one other individual. This eliminates the argument for pure isolationism, yet the authors of these works clearly convey the danger of pure pluralism. The middle ground is interdependence. Humans must

depend on each other to survive, yet no single person or unit must be so important that, if removed, the society would crumble.

There are many situations of internal dystopia, each corresponding to elements of the fictional ruling powers in these works. The largest motivating component in this literature is fear, typically from isolation, change and punishment. These are the three prime motivators in self-imposed dystopian behaviors that hold people back from experience life in fuller ways.

There is great comfort for many people to know that they are not alone. There are plenty of documented cases of psychoses and neuroses that stem from isolation. Infants that

changes, the person feels out of place, lost, confused, or disenfranchised.

A common occurrence of this is when a group changes a leader, such as a new past or in a church, a new boss at work, or even a couple that breaks up. A person with a healthy sense of identity adjusts to fit the new dynamic and paradigm. One who has lost their sense of identity to the group has nothing they can adjust. The group itself has changed, and as that particular group identity is gone, there are no longer the defining elements that allowed that person to feel "themselves". They will either stay or leave, but in either case, they do not adjust; they merely trade the outdated group identity for the This idea is clearly shown in "1984" when Oceania current one. changes enemies from East Asia to Eurasia in the middle of a The speaker receives the news in his ear and hat e speech. continues his tirade against the enemy, only changing the name. Volunteers quickly run and replace the hate posters to match the In sometimes less tangible forms of punishment, fear can creep into the mind of anyone seeking to better themselves, simply because it contains the unknown. One might be afraid to fail because they fear the punishment of ridicule. Another might be afraid to succeed because they fear the punishment of envy or mutiny. Many have experienced well-meaning friends and loved ones who will politely caution against setting hopes too high, yet turn around and chastise for not being proactive.

Finally, an important element for any dystopia to be effective is the management and manipulation of truth. Possibly the most common way individuals keep themselves chained is by ignoring their own ignorance. It is much easier to close one's eyes to environmental, political and humanitarian concerns around the world, because one fears that learning of these issues will lead to an uncomfortable lifestyle change. It is easier to say, "I don't want to know," rather than be willing to let new evidence inform future decisions. This keeps people rooted to a false, self-constructed paradigm that becomes farther from reality as time passes. In "Anthem", the society lives without electricity. It is not clear how this was lost, but when Equality discovers electrical power and how to harness it, he is rebuked for assuming to know more than the Scholars.

If this one idea can be overcome, the idea that truth is not something to be feared but something to be embraced, then

all other fears can be overcome and individuals can grow and evolve, their only constraint being the pace of their search for truth. Combined with a healthy community built on interdependence, the search for truth will ultimately result in the powerful discovery of meaning and significance. To fully experience the joys and wonder of humanity, humans must take responsibility for their actions, keep their eyes and minds open to greater understanding and deeper knowledge, value the life around them, and embrace themselves as members of existence.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

The protagonists in dystopian stories often share a common They learn that there is more to experience than their government will allow, they feel a previously-repressed need or desire grow from within; they ultimately determine that life as they know it is not really life as it should be. What sets them apart from the countless others is their decision to question, their willingness to challenge presumptions, their thirst for knowledge and experience, and courage to risk their comfort to make life better. While these are all admirable qualities in the opinion of most, it requires stepping out of a comfort zone and being willing to hurt for the cause. The reason these protagonists are truly heroes is that they are not, in general, merely doing this for their own good, but for the good of the entire human race. It becomes irrelevant in the story whether the person lives or dies in the process. The determinant of their success is whether or not they improved the situation for those to follow.

Turning to present day reality, these heroes are typically known as activists. Martin Luther King, Jr., Stephen Biko, Mahatma GrahlNsrolt beeoglifort zhMbthe persomle person liesyoige tood eac

very public version of the decision to overcome individual and political dystopias.

A dystopia becomes successful when it finally removes the individuality from the individual; the humanity from the human. Only when people become numbers, not "one" but "one of", can a ruling power truly take over. There have been and always will be unfair and corrupt governments and systems, but what makes one of these truly dystopic is the acceptance from the masses that agree, "This is right."

Just as an oligarchy can strip power from individuals, individuals can relinquish their own selves through internal constructs that equal nothing short of a dystopia.

Manipulation, misinformation, ignorance and fear need not always come from the outside. Indeed, when originating from one's own mind, the effects can be much more persuasive and the damage

much more lasting.

As the heroes of dystopian literature struggled and fought to overcome the external sources of control, so each individual must look inside themselves to find those things that bind them to fear, slavery, war and ignorance. As the mindless blindly shuffle along in uniformity in so many of these classic texts, there is a part of each human that is blind to the limits they have themselves allowed to be placed on their lives. Once aware of these limits, they have the same choice as D-503, Winston

Smith or Bernard Marx: to go with the flow or swim upstream

The choice to fight the system is never without sacrifice, and one may not overcome deep-seeded roots of fear and ignorance in their own minds without a great deal of struggle. But the end result, as each dystopian hero believes and hopes to reach, is freedom

### APPENDIX A: SIGNS & PORTENTS

Following is a list of items from popular dystopian works that find correspondence in our society today. These may not necessarily lead to a dystopian society, but are simply presented as possible hints of things to come.

Big Brother is watching you. "1984"

Chicago has begun implementing digital surveillance systems
 all throughout the city to monitor various activities.
 Cameras are fitted with microphones that can react to sounds
 like gunshots, swiveling quickly to catch as much action as possible. Speeding tickets are also issued through camera surveillance.

Houses are made of glass to remove privacy. "We"

- Under the Patriot Act, the government may perform various invasions of privacy if they suspect one of ties to a terrorist organization.

The owls died out first. "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?"

- All around the world, millions of bees are dying. This has created a serious concern for many who understand the role bees play in pollination and agriculture. Bleakest estimates

show that without a turnaround in bee population, humans may be required to begin seeking alternative food sources in as little as ten years.

The enemy does not matter, as long as there is one. "1984"

- Everything is a war: the war on terror, the war on drugs, the war on cancer, the war on communism, the war on illiteracy, etc. Keeping the language of war conjures a certain set of reactions and systems of dealing with problems, creating a "with us or against us" mentality, leaving less room for creative problem solving.

For eign workers are abused and abandoned. "Children of Men"

 Public awareness and concern is reaching an unprecedented high in the United States regarding foreign workers and illegal immigrants. Stories of abuse and unfair practices are common.

Everyone embraced The Sameness. "The Giver"

- Youth sports leagues have removed winning and losing from the game, to avoid hurt feelings in children. Names for ethnic groups have changed several times over the years to be more sensitive and politically correct, leaving people unsure what to call their neighbors. Due to globalization, younger

adults are leaving poorer countries in droves in search of a better life, and in doing so, adopt the culture of their new home, losing ties with their own heritage. Sometimes a single generation later, they are not able to speak their native language.

Narcotics are mass-distributed. "Brave New World"

- Pharmaceutical companies have never sold more emotion-related drugs than at present. Whether for social anxiety, depression, insomnia or hyperactivity, both children and adults are more heavily-medicated now than people of any other time.

- Fahr enheit 451 (1966)
- Gattaca (1997)
- I di ocracy (2006)
- The Island (2005)
- M nority Report (2002)
- Planet of the Apes (1968) (2001)
- THX 1138 (1971)
- V for Vendetta (2005)

### Non-Fiction

- The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature M Keith Booker (1994)
- No Place Else: Explorations in Utopian and Dystopian Fiction
  - Edited by Rabkin, Greenberg and Clander (1983)