

# Dark Futures: The Power and Purpose of Dystopian Fiction

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*Adapted by Fishtank Staff*

- 1 Imagine a world where everything has gone wrong. The government controls the population, people cannot speak freely, and technology watches your every move. Pollution darkens the air and wars are constantly being fought. This is the world of dystopian fiction. This genre explores what a future society could look like if modern-day problems worsen and people fail to solve them.
- 2 This may sound like a frightening world to read about! But these stories are not just meant to scare readers about the future. They also make us think about the problems our world is facing today. That way, we can figure out how to stop these dark, fictional futures from becoming reality.

## From Utopia to Dystopia

- 3 The ideas in dystopian fiction grew out of the opposite idea: *utopia*, an imagined ideal place. In 1516, an English writer named Sir Thomas More wrote *Utopia*. This novel describes an island community where there is no war, corruption, or poverty. Everyone shares goods and lives in harmony. Although earlier philosophers like Plato and Socrates had also imagined perfect worlds, More was the first to use the word "utopia" in his work. "Utopia" means either "good place" or "no place" in Greek. The double meaning of this word suggests that a utopia can only exist in a person's imagination. At first, More's novel inspired other authors to imagine what a perfect world would be like. But over time, writers began to shift their focus away from dreaming about perfect worlds.
- 4 Major world events in the 1800s and 1900s made people realize that a real-life utopia might be out of reach. World War I and World War II caused massive death and destruction around the globe. Oppressive governments controlled what their citizens could say and do. Even new technology meant to improve lives led to new problems like air pollution and unsafe working conditions. These issues, along with newer threats of nuclear war and environmental damage, caused widespread uncertainty and fear. They also inspired writers to imagine dark futures in their stories. Readers began seeing their concerns about society and politics reflected in the new genre of dystopian literature.

## Dystopian Fiction Over Time

- 5 Dystopian fiction emerged as a genre of literature in the early 1900s. One of the first dystopian novels was *The Time Machine*, written by H. G. Wells in 1895. In it, Wells imagined a world more than 800,000 years in the future where the rich and poor have become different species. This novel's themes raised concerns about the growing wealth gap between social classes in Victorian England at the turn of the 20th century.
- 6 Other early dystopian books were written as a reaction to governments controlling what people could say or do. *We*, by Yevgeny Zhemyatin, showed a future where the government watches everyone, so no one can think or act freely. Even though this book was fictional, its themes connected to what was happening in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. At that time, Soviet writers and thinkers who spoke out against the totalitarian government were in danger of being killed or sent to labor camps. The book *We* was banned in the Soviet Union, but many people read it around the world.
- 7 *We* set the stage for other dystopian writing in the 1940s and 1950s, like George Orwell's 1984 and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. Both books reflected worrisome trends in society around the time of World War II. Orwell and Bradbury saw how authoritarian leaders oppressed their citizens and used mass media to control public perception. They infused the dystopian worlds of their novels with surveillance and controlling governments. Orwell also wrote about nuclear war in his novel, clearly inspired by the U.S. dropping two atomic bombs on Japan. These novels spoke to audiences around the world. Ironically, they were also banned in some countries and schools.
- 8 In the 1960s and 1970s, many dystopian books began focusing on problems like pollution, overpopulation, and climate change. More recently, dystopian books have included warnings about social media and the lack of privacy in the modern world. Over time, the common themes in dystopian fiction have evolved as new societal issues have emerged.

## What Makes a Dystopian Story?

- 9 Even as dystopian fiction has changed to reflect the important issues of the times, certain features have remained constant. Many of these stories take place in a world struck with disaster, like a global war or environmental collapse. The rich and powerful usually take control during or after these disasters. One way these ruling powers keep control is by manipulating their citizens through propaganda. For example, in *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, societal elders limit people's access to emotions and memories. This stifles differences among the people and ensures that they accept their limited world without question. The elders use propaganda to uphold the image of the society as a utopia and reduce the possibility of rebellion.

- 10 Another way governments in dystopian tales maintain control is by creating a culture of fear through surveillance. These governments constantly watch their citizens and violently enforce strict rules to maintain conformity. In Orwell's *1984*, the government, called the Party, monitors its citizens through telescreens. It punishes citizens who speak out or even have thoughts that go against the Party. This atmosphere encourages people to betray each other and keeps them living in fear.
- 11 Controlling citizens' access to knowledge is also a key tactic of governments in dystopian fiction. Books, art, and literature are usually seen as threats to governments in these stories. Governments ban or destroy these sources of self-expression and knowledge to censor "dangerous" ideas and maintain control. For example, in *Fahrenheit 451*, books are outlawed; firemen, rather than putting out fires, are tasked with burning any books that are found.
- 12 But even in these dark settings, there is usually hope. In recent dystopian novels and films, the main characters are often young people who recognize the evils of their society and rebel against them. These characters question the current norms and often find themselves at odds with the authorities as they challenge the established order and seek change. Even when fighting powerful governments or monsters made by dangerous technologies, these individuals stand up for what is right. Dystopian novels often blend this fight with coming-of-age themes. Their young protagonists navigate personal growth and search for their identities amid the extreme challenges of a dystopian world. They work to change their world, often learning more about themselves along the way. Their efforts show the reader that there is still hope for a brighter future.

## Why Dystopian Fiction Matters

- 13 Why does dystopian fiction continue to be so popular? It holds up a mirror to the real world and helps us understand it more. It encourages us to think critically about ongoing societal issues, and it reminds us that individuals and communities have the power to create change. Ray Bradbury emphasized this idea when he said, "I am a preventer of futures, not a predictor of them. I wrote *Fahrenheit 451* to prevent book-burnings, not to induce that future into happening, or even to say that it was inevitable." His words hold even more weight today, as book bans are put in place in schools across the U.S. These real-life echoes of Bradbury's book remind us that today's societal challenges are not brand new, but instead have long roots in history. At the same time, works like Bradbury's encourage us to question and confront those challenges head-on.
- 14 Humans have always had fears about the future. With society constantly changing, it can be frightening to look far ahead. But that is why the dystopian genre remains important and relevant. These stories remind us all that we must work to shape our future for the better . . . or face the consequences.