

# Dystopias: Definition and Characteristics

## *Introduction*

We have all seen movies or read books about the end of the world as we know it. In each instance, a different method for world domination is portrayed. In some cases, ray gun-toting aliens with big heads invade the planet and put their enormous insect-like queen on a throne in the White House. In others, the citizens of the world are slowly brainwashed by prime time television into becoming dull-witted slaves to evil multinational conglomerates. These books and movies have one thing in common: they are all dystopias.

Simply, a **dystopia** is defined as a bad place, a place where no one would want to live, a place in which one's rights and freedoms would be gone, a place where the environment would be devastated. In fiction, like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, or in movies like *The Matrix*, the bad place is more than a setting. The dystopia acts as a vehicle for an author's dramatic opinion about the way we live today. In this way, dystopian literature is usually crafted so that it acts as a warning to us - to stop what we're doing or face the consequences.

You may wonder how dystopian literature is different from fairy tales or horror stories. The difference is this: a dystopia is more than a yarn about a person who acts badly in an otherwise sane world. In a dystopia, everything (from subordinate characters to setting and beyond) focuses on one evil premise. The protagonist is an outcast of this world and usually the only one able to see the problems inherent in it.

The term **dystopia** is derived from Greek and is the opposite of a utopia. **Utopian** literature details a good place, a perfect place - a place that does not and will not exist. Unlike a dystopia, a utopia is difficult to describe. Writers of utopian literature are often caught in a pickle: the perfect place for one is never the perfect place for all. Because of this, the term "**utopian**" can be used outside the literary world to negatively describe a concept or belief as wildly naive and idealistic. A dystopia, on the other hand, generally has wide-spread appeal to audiences because it plays upon our deepest fears - a loss of life, liberty, and happiness.

**Dystopia** - literally, a bad place, often used as a literary device in which authors warn readers of the dangers of society's present course if continued in the future. A futuristic, imagined universe in which oppressive societal control and the illusion of a perfect society are maintained through corporate, bureaucratic, technological, moral, or totalitarian control. Dystopias, through an exaggerated worst-case scenario, make a criticism about a current trend, societal norm, or political system.

**Eutopia/Utopia** - an ideal place that does not exist in reality. A place, state, or condition that is ideally perfect in respect of politics, laws, customs, and conditions (From Greek *eutopia* meaning no place and *eutopia* meaning good place.)

## **Characteristics of a Dystopian Society**

- Propaganda is used to control the citizens of society.
- Information, independent thought, and freedom are restricted.
- A figurehead or concept is worshipped by the citizens of the society.
- Citizens are perceived to be under constant surveillance.
- Citizens have a fear of the outside world.
- Citizens live in a dehumanized state.
- The natural world is banished and distrusted.
- Citizens conform to uniform expectations. Individuality and dissent are bad.

## Types of Dystopian Controls

Most dystopian works present a world in which oppressive societal control and the illusion of a perfect society are maintained through one or more of the following types of controls:

- ❖ Corporate control: One or more large corporations control society through products, advertising, and/or the media. Examples include *Minority Report* and *Running Man*.
- ❖ Bureaucratic control: Society is controlled by a mindless bureaucracy through a tangle of red tape, relentless regulations, and incompetent government officials. Examples in film include *Brazil*.
- ❖ Technological control: Society is controlled by technology—through computers, robots, and/or scientific means. Examples include *The Matrix*, *The Terminator*, and *I, Robot*.
- ❖ Philosophical/religious control: Society is controlled by philosophical or religious ideology often enforced through a dictatorship or theocratic government.

## Traits of Dystopian fiction

Many films and works of literature featuring dystopian societies exhibit at least a few of the following traits:

The society is an illusion of a perfect utopian world.

- ❖ A selectively told back story of a war, revolution, uprising, spike in overpopulation, natural disaster or some other climatic event which resulted in dramatic changes to society
- ❖ A standard of living among the lower and middle class that is generally poorer than in the contemporary society. This is not always the case, however—in *Brave New World* and *Equilibrium* people enjoy a much higher standard of living in exchange for the loss of intelligence and emotion respectively.
- ❖ A protagonist who questions the society. The dystopian protagonist often feels trapped and is struggling to escape; questions the existing social and political systems; believes or feels that something is terribly wrong with the society in which he or she lives; helps the audience recognize the negative aspects of the dystopian world through his or her perspective.
- ❖ Necessarily, if it is based on our world, a shift of emphasis of control to corporations, autocratic cliques or bureaucracies.
- ❖ Because dystopian literature takes place in the future, it often features technology more advanced than that of the contemporary society. Usually, the advanced technology comparable to or more primitive than what we have today.
- ❖ For the reader to engage with it, dystopian fiction typically has one other trait: familiarity. It is not enough to show people living in a society that seems pleasant. The society must have echoes of today, of the reader's own experience. If the reader can identify the patterns or trends that would lead to the dystopia, it becomes a more involving and effective experience. Authors can use a dystopia effectively to highlight their own concerns about societal trends.