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An exploration of dystopian fiction in the high school English literature curriculum.

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ABSTRACT

This extended essay explores the validity of teaching twentieth century dystopian fiction in twenty-first century classrooms. This extended essay explores changing state society interactions, the role of the individual in a world in which technology is ubiquitous and increasingly plays a role in driving those changes, the simultaneous perceived freeing and enslaving tendencies of those same technologies, and the ambiguous relationship that exists between these technologies and individuals. At the heart of the discussion is the question of the compatibility of classical dystopian literature in the contemporary classroom.

The scope of the essay is not limited to one novel. The corner stones of twentieth century dystopian literature such as Huxley's *Brave New World*, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* are compared and contrasted with the popular dystopian novels of the present which young adults prefer. Malley's *Declaration, Legacy & Resistance* trilogy and Collins' *Hunger Games* trilogy are two of them. Literary commentaries and articles from literature journals have been used to support the discussion.

This essay concludes that the aim of an author while creating a dystopia is to mirror questionable or disturbing trends in his society in order to shift the direction that the society appears to be taking. From this perspective, dystopian literature can be seen as embodying a cautionary tale. Besides their literary value, the dystopias of the twentieth century may not be able to offer a prescriptive point of view to young adults who have been born into a world which in many respects is already characterized by the very context about which the classic genre warns. This essay acknowledges the power of literary texts over the public and the constructivist interplay that exists between an author and his society.

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Change has always been the intertwined locus of cause and effect, the driver of history. The only thing that differs over time is the magnitude of the change, which is measured by the effects which specific changes create in the daily life of an individual. The extent to which a society is prepared and or willing to accept or adhere to those changes determines the revolutionary or reformatory tone of the change. Society in large measure is a conservative actor. Revolutionary change is often violent not least because of the conservative nature of society. By the time it decides that it will no longer accept certain conditions avenues toward change and institutions that can manage change are bereft of power. The uncertainties that change brings, especially when thought to seriously erode social relations or perceived as worsening the human condition are mirrored in the genre of literature known as dystopia. Dystopian fiction is the textual canaries in the mine that sound the alarm of impending catastrophe. The dystopia is a narrative of urgency, a call to escape the threat of the collapsing world that surrounds a call to get to the surface, a call to breathe life anew. It prevents people from making the same mistakes which they did in the past, it prevents history to be repeated.

In a dystopia, society itself is the antagonist actively working to impede the protagonist's aim, obstruct his desires and erode his moral values. The first known use of the term was in 1868, in a speech before the British Parliament. Later, with the evolution of a new genre in which society has completely degenerated either from the viewpoint of the author or the reader, the term was installed to represent that genre which is antithetical to utopian castles in the air.

Three dystopias in particular are considered classics of the genre and are widely taught in high school English literature classes; Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which shows how a government can manipulate the people by manipulating the truth and manipulating the news –"newspeak" is probably the most recognizable of "the big three"; the term "Big Brother" is synonymous with tyrannical governments, fascism, and dystopian science fiction (Dayton, 2008).

In a dystopia, authors create fictional worlds often in futuristic societies with the aim of mirroring the society in which they live. What distinguishes the dystopian genre from the genres of either science or speculative fiction is its allegorical context or appeal.

This is one of the hallmarks expected of a good dystopia, especially the ones to be taught at high school where the students are meant to be encouraged to use as many skills they have learned as possible.

Astor (2013) posits that the reason behind high school students' interest in dystopian fiction is because they get to read about rather than live through the horror of the future and the reader is compelled to turn the pages wondering if rebels and other members of the populace can somehow remake a wretched society into something more positive. This fits with Smagorinsky's (2000) suggestion that reading dystopias helps students to reflect on the development of character. Consequently, to be aware of possible futures and, importantly, to develop the moral foresight required to imagine their own actions given the particular set of wretchedness an author presents. The discussion then is to reflect on their society and their realities.

Frequently, the setting of dystopian fiction falls within the rubric of science fiction. However, what distinguishes dystopian fiction set in the future from the much broader genre of science fiction is the moralistic presentation of the society. What better way to encourage discussion than to present a world characterized by social relations in upheaval and political conditions in disarray? Reading dystopian novels in English literature is thus meant to achieve a key goal of learning: to promote class discussion that raises awareness and encourages critical thinking.

Obviously, the farther removed the work is perceived to be from the concerns of the reader the less likely he or she will be to engage with the text (Hill, 2012). For dystopian fiction, which has as its aim, the exposure of the students to the horrors of possible futures, attracting the attention of the student is vital because the literature serves as a starting point for the student's own ideas. (Dimock, 2009) What then can dystopian fiction offer adolescents whose concerns appear to be puberty, opposite-sex relations, changing family dynamics, and conformity and peer groups? Can the "three big ones" offer the twenty-first century student food for thought? Are there more recent cautionary tales for students to explore?

A central plank in each of the big three is the absolute control of the public by authoritarian governments for whom control of the public, the creation of herd mentality, is accomplished by creating very narrow windows for the citizenry to be secure and comfortable, to be in effect an unrecognizable part of the whole. This is either consolidated through propaganda, prohibitions and bans over personal relations such as are seen in *Nineteen Eighty Four*. This mentality is a core tenet of the world created by Collins (2010) in *Hunger Games* in which the public is segregated by districts to serve as a source of consumables and where the people in Capitol are considered to be royalty or at least members of a higher class, much like the caste system created in *Brave New World*, or the hierarchy that separates party members in *Nineteen Eighty Four*.

Another related theme is the expropriation to the public of one's private life. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the institution of the family is in service of the state. In Malley's (2010) *Declaration, Legacy & Resistance Trilogy* there are restrictions in child birth due to over-population. In *The Children of Men* (2006) no children have been born for two decades. The reader is asked to imagine a world "emptied of fertility" (Kozma and Eldred, 2007). Is this not a direct reference to the world of diminishment that today's adolescents are going to encounter? A world where environmental crises, climate catastrophes, and species extinction (our own?) loom large on the horizon?

Intolerable living conditions, the loss of civil liberties, constant surveillance, violence, mind control, uniformity and overarching consumerism. These are the themes of yesterday's dystopian fiction. Today we see third millennium protests against these very conditions; "Occupy Wall Street", "Gezi Park Protest", "Arab Spring" or "Wikileaks". While these themes seem to have become an inevitability of twenty-first century modern urban life, we also have different concerns. These concerns stretch from us to the very support structure on which we depend: limited goods, the sixth great extinction, global warming, sea level rise, increased alienation and personal crises. However, these are neither studied nor are they present in twentieth century dystopian novels.

The power of a literary text to affect the way people think and to influences their choices is probably the key reasoning behind studying dystopias in the high school English literature class.

The genre serves as a tool to sensitize young people's perceptions both by creating room for empathic responses to the protagonist's plight and as a platform for critical thinking individuals.

The fictional setting, part of the genre's creative structure, is an essential hook and is meant to capture the attention of the young adult readers. Considering the example of *The Hunger Games* trilogy, one can see that by using "high-stakes" scenarios, dystopian fiction provides conflict and adventure which draws instant sympathy for the protagonist from the reader. According to mass cultural notion, popularity of a novel belonging to young adult literature is inversely proportional to their quality, which deports most of the young adult dystopias from the list of books to be discussed in an academic basis.

In spite of their attraction to reading dystopian fiction, twenty-first century students have other informational resources than print media. Any information they want is only one click away. Technology facilitates the process of through the numerous portable devices and social networks which distract and attract. The changes in the technological world create circumstances in which our relationship to information is continually altering. Its ubiquity poses a threat to privacy through the universal surveillance.

! The fast-changing world in which students are maturing demands that teachers introduce them to some of the remarkable recently published dystopias directed at young readers. Living everything faster and earlier than before encourages adolescents to choose the easiest way of doing everything. Twenty-first century people now consider thinking, philosophy and questioning as simply taking too long. For young adults, known as the 'fast-food generation' due to the new common lifestyle of immediate consumption and instant gratification even books should present straightforward relationships to the students. This is a quality that makes recent dystopian novels vital for literature courses. The dystopian genre asks questions about dilemmas of philosophy history. What is freedom? What is love? What is humanity? What is justice? Even the discussing those questions may help students with their mental evolutionary process and change their approach to literary texts yet, how to nest these into English curriculum is the big question, to which, answer is simple; Young adult texts with compelling themes lead students into reading and the enjoyment of literature (Christenbury, 2006).

Making allowances for the fact that young people are exposed to a violent culture through television, rising school aggression and war-mongering computer games, addressing their conscience gains even more importance.

There are many dystopias on the market that reach a very high number of readers. Some best-selling dystopias which are also accepted by young adults could be very useful in literature courses, for example, *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2010), the *Declaration, Legacy & Resistance* Trilogy (Malley, 2010) and *The Uglies* series (Westerfeld, 2011). Best selling dystopias combat the biased student prejudice toward classic dystopias as boring political books which only create pessimism and a sense of futility about the future.

To some degree, studying classic dystopias to understand the dangers of a future world (which may already have passed) contradicts one of the essential characteristics of the dystopian genre. Once terrifying themes from the classical genre are now an everyday reality, for example: constant surveillance, a distorted idea of the family, fertility, gender roles, censorship, new vocabulary meant to mislead. Some of the scarier events have already happened. For example, in *1984* the government of Oceania always had access to any personal information of anybody; in the twenty-first century national security organs of state have the same "right", be it the NSA in the United States or the National Intelligence Organization in Turkey.

One unusual characteristic for the genre is that twenty-first century dystopias have relatively happy endings compared to their more distant cousins of the twentieth century. In the big three, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Fahrenheit 451,* and *Brave New World*, the endings destroy utterly the protagonist. At the end of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston experiences a fate worse than death. As a result of extreme torture, electroconvulsive therapy and a lobotomy he is robbed of his personality, of his individuality. He accepts everything he once denied and loathed. Similarly, Savage John of *Brave New World* becomes alienated from society as punishment for moving and thinking in opposition to the false reasoning of major mass culture. What are we to make of Guy Montag and his fellow firemen who rush about burning books to ensure no one has an opportunity to inform themselves about the world or to see a multiplicity of opinions of which their own could be but one of many? The democratizing influence of the internet combined with portable reading devices makes his plight more absurd than surreal.

Both the *Hunger Games* series (Collins, 2010) and the *Declaration, Legacy & Resistance* Trilogy (Malley, 2010) have relatively optimistic endings not only symbolizing hope, but suggesting a greater cultural adaptability than previously thought possible. Perhaps we have learned to live with elements of these dystopian futures. At the end of the *Hunger Games* series, the revolution triggered by the protagonist reaches a successful conclusion: the deep socio-economic abyss between people is abolished, the spectrum of human rights and freedoms has been widened and there is a future, a future of better days.

Since the conditions of the twenty-first century have already been mentioned without commenting on class room materials it is now time to turn our mind to how a teacher can support a learning environment conducive to both the modern genre and the networked student. The teacher has to be willing to access technology to bring relevant movies, songs, documentaries, poems, caricatures and so on into the class room. Expecting students to simply use the printed text -- been there, done that -- is completely removed from the expectations of today's generation of learners. Providing students with texts which they can re-create with their interpretations is also considered as vital according to Paulo Freire who is one of the potent theorists of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1973). After all, the aim of the curriculum is to raise individuals who are able to think critically, to see things from a multitude of perspectives. To reach this goal, teachers need to give up on the idea of technology as being somehow antithetical to learning literature. This is the point where the point of view of the teacher and the student collides; teachers usually concentrate on the seriousness of a text while deciding whether it is "fit" to be discussed in the class or not. Exciting events or vibrant ideas such as magic and high technology are not particularly attractive. Although it is not considered a dystopia *Lord of The Rings* is not widely put in school curriculums for the very same reason. Or else how it could be explained that one of the classics of fantasy adventure literature receives so little attention? However students seek for extraordinary events within the story rather than mediocre slow plots, which makes it compulsory to update dystopias in English literature classes at high schools.

The problem of historical proximity seems to lie at the heart of why students might prefer to read modern dystopias rather than the classics. To understand this problem better the big three will be discussed.

The reason why the classic works are preferred would seem to be that they enlighten a period of milestone in human history and reflect the concerns that time period brought to intellectuals' minds.

Brave New World exposed fears about how the Industrial Revolution was changing not just the human condition but ultimately what it meant to be human culminating in industrialized birth. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* we have the antagonist O'Brien openly declaring that the society they live in resembles Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, the totalitarian monstrosities which destroyed utterly and forever the idea of individuality -- imagine a boot stamping on a human face – forever.

Visions of a future characterized by the "Hatchery and Conditioning Centres" of *Brave New World* or applications such as the "Two Minutes of Hate" of *Nineteen-Eighty Four* may indeed comply with pessimistic reflections of the times. However, human fertility, demography, and the changing face of the family, of parents, of sex itself, have proven to be far more adaptable and much more resistant to industrial intrusion than *Brave New World* could ever have imagined. Where is the diversity of same-sex parents and multiple sexualities and genders in classic dystopias? Likewise, the community bonding meant to be fostered by "hating together" harks back to kind of "klan rally" and appears trivial in a globalized world focusing on collaboration as a sought after twenty-first century academic and professional skill.

The invention of the internet and social networking has empowered individuals and societies to break free of the parochial islands of thought control imagined by the classical genre. Rapid coverage of any global event makes it increasingly difficult to manipulate events or people's perception of them. While twenty-first century societies may be concerned about what is taking place behind closed doors, Wikileaks and other actors have disclosed documents, exposed corruption, and instituted transparency, bringing a renewed sense of urgency to debates about the role of technology and the limits of governmental power in the arenas of global and individual surveillance. In the hugely popular dystopian film *Matrix* the human population is trapped in a machine world.

Rather than worry about whether we are part of the machine most students with their constant networking, selfie sharing, and instantaneous real world picture and video uploading, see themselves ultimately as arbiters of the machine's make up. It's not about "machines controlling the world" but about us networking to become individual nodes that participate in a growing global collective in which we are democratizing the world of ideas and shifting power away from tradition elites, away from the machine. Anyone with an i-phone can upload images to the world; anyone with an extra five dollars can contribute to kickstart.org and together fund documentaries – real news about real people, processes, policies.

To understand the twenty-first century, to assess the "known unknowns" lurking just over the horizon and to keep constant vigilance for the "unknown" ones students do need to learn how to think critically about the world in which they are preparing to take their place. Those literary texts which are to be read as cautionary tales at high school must address the challenges the readers are faced with now. Twenty-first century dystopias serve this purpose for several concrete reasons. When the author chooses to embed his story in a future setting which is vividly described and merged with the present day's technological inventions it brings one major advantage: it helps the students to internalize the text which then leads them to identify with protagonists. Classic dystopian protagonists are not even in the same age range as high school students because "the big three" chose the adults of the twentieth century as their target group, either against Hitler's or Stalin's, Franco's or Musollini's totalitarian governments, no matter which, "the big three" were trying to engage the interests of adults, not adolescents at school. Whereas, twenty first century dystopias appear to chose young adults as their target group. Identifying themselves with the protagonist gives students hope and belief to fight against possible future injustices and their dystopian nature reminds young adults what their responsibilities will be as future citizens. With so many contemporary dystopias being published it would be beneficial if more of them made it into the classroom.

Conclusion

Students read when the material is relevant to their lives. To analyze the media-saturated lives and quickly changing world around them, people and especially young adults have to gain knowledge about literary texts which comply with the concerns of the world around them. The classics of twentieth century dystopian literature Huxley's *Brave New World*, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* may be perceived as incomplete in this regard. It is their inability to adequately reflect twenty-first century concerns that leaves the twentieth century dystopia out of place in the twenty-first century classroom. If the aim is not only to be exposed to a description of an alternate future which is strikingly like the present of the reader, if the aim is to engage the student, then perhaps it is time to open up the curriculum to new voices.

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