
Of Chaos and Criticism

“May the odds be ever in your favor,” a smiling Effie Trinket declares to a crowd of grim faces; the pink-haired administrator is about to draw the names of the next two tributes who will represent District 12 at the 74th Hunger Games. Along with tributes from the other districts, they will be thrown into an arena to fight until only one is left standing. Their chances of survival are incredibly slim—the truth is, in nearly every dystopian plot, the odds are hardly in anyone’s favor. Oppressed by the system, the characters in these stories must rise to the occasion, challenge the norm and break free from their respective situations. Various predicaments may make these heroes miserable, but the readers certainly aren’t. After all, their struggles make for an epic adventure. With the upcoming release of films like *The Giver* and *The Maze Runner*, dystopian fiction is again becoming the talk of the town. These film adaptations are a testament to the genre’s enduring relevance and its ability to leave us at the edge of our seats.

Past, present and future

According to Maria Mina, a part-time lecturer at the English Department who specializes in science fiction, the dystopian world is essentially a failed utopia. While utopian novels speculate as to what a perfect society might be like, dystopian novels paint a much bleaker picture of reality. “We cannot point to a single text and say, ‘This is the beginning of dystopia,’ but we can do that with utopia,” Mina explains. Usually interpreted as a social satire, Thomas More’s iconic *Utopia* (1516) was the very first of its kind. It was set in a fictional island with its own unique set of customs, which contradicted those of European society at the time.

“On the surface, dystopia has the appearance of a utopia,” Mina explains. “The majority of the people who dwell in it embrace it, even when it opposes them.” Both feature a regulated society where the fate of the individual rests in the hands of the state. But while totalitarian rule breeds peace and order in a utopia, this desire for perfection can eventually lead to self-destruction in a dystopia. Mina cites the release of H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* (1895) as a pivotal moment in dystopian literature because of its setting. Before it was published, most dystopian stories were set in a different place; Wells’ novella, on the other hand, is set in a distant time, following the Time Traveller nearly 30 million years into the future. He is shocked by what he finds because, as Mina claims, “[dystopia] is the nightmare of the future.”

The dystopia largely came about due to society’s disillusionment with science. Although science was first seen as a life-saving force, its reputation eventually took a turn for the worse, especially in the wake of two World Wars and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. “Science for us is, at best, a double-edged sword,” Mina says. “We think of it as something

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that's far more likely to kill us than save us all. "Jocelyn Martin, Ph.D., an assistant instructor at the English Department with a specialization in trauma studies, adds that the popularity of the genre grew more pronounced after the end of the Cold War, the crumbling of the Berlin Wall and the 9/11 attacks. In this modern day and age, the enemy can no longer be easily identified. "This global unease reveals itself in the interrogation of the status of the heroin recent films," she adds.

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