

POLITICIZING DYSTOPIA: POWER, POLITICS, AND THE DYSTOPIAN TEXT

How might dystopian novels reveal the politics and power of our collective cultural and contemporary experience?

"... we admire dystopian novels because, by giving us worst-case scenarios of the future, maybe our current society can be jolted enough to avoid those scenarios eventually happening in real life. Like some of the characters in dystopian novels, we might feel a little against-all-odds hope. Then again, maybe not..."

-- Dave Astor, Huffington Post columnist

[Read his article, Why Do We Like Dystopian Novels?, HERE for our first class.](#)

Description

Recent trends in young adult literature (and big-budget, blockbuster Hollywood movies) illustrate a pervading high-interest in dystopian fiction. In the wake of *The Hunger Games* phenomenon, not only have new dystopian novels – series such as *The Maze Runner*, *Divergent*, and *Chaos Walking* – captured the imagination of many teens, but there has been a renewed interest in classic dystopian stories – such as *The Giver*, *Brave New World*, and *1984* – as well. While this literature offers captivating and often realistic and terrifying depictions of the modern world, it also invites opportunities to compare our contemporary experience to those characterized by (and predicted in?) these novels.

The primary, academic purpose of this course is to come to know, describe, and analyze the concept of dystopia as it is conceptualized through various framing lenses. This process will be done mainly through a study of fiction (novels, short stories, and poetry) and supplemented through other texts such as film, art and photography, music, and theatre. In order to collectively articulate visions of what dystopia is, how it works, and how it is relevant to our current social climate, we will use political and social theories and concepts of morality as a foundation and basis to reflect upon and to challenge and complicate our evolving and developing notions of dystopia. My intention in this regard is to expose you to political theory that examines and occupies various stances on *human nature* and how, therefore, those viewpoints influence and inform *government, power, and control*. These ideas will be applied to the dystopian literature we read for class.

On another level, the quotation headlining this syllabus, reflects what I think and hope to be my “macro-goal” for the class – one that cannot necessarily be measured or assessed, but one that I hope leaves a lasting impression with you. Simply stated, that, years from now, you might remember how these fictional, dystopian worlds came into being and, thus, that you might resist them by all means necessary in whatever way you can. In this way, I see the course as “subversively” creating active and critical consumers and global citizens who might be encouraged one day into social action. That is the power of critical fiction and active reading.

While this course is ideal for those JMC students who have significant background in political theory (CCP and PTCD), it does cover the relevant theorists students are expected to engage with and presumes basic prior knowledge of political theory. Students might benefit from and are encouraged to incorporate, however, their own knowledge and understandings of political theory in papers, projects, and class discussions. Nonetheless, all students are welcome to take this course.

Learning Objectives

SWBAT:

- Formulate and describe characteristics and types of dystopia as illustrated through various forms (fiction, film, art, photography, current events, politics, etc.) and **through concepts such as: human nature, power, government, control**
- Closely analyze, compare and contrast, and collaborative construct dystopian texts through various lenses (political, cultural, moral, contemporary, and literary) and in various means (papers, discussions, group presentations)
- Critique and complicate developing and evolving notions of dystopia
- **Connect dystopian concepts discussed in class to some current (global, political, cultural) context and climate and interpret them as a cultural “text”**
- Synthesize diverse concepts of dystopia and framing lenses into coherent and effective thoughts and written ideas

Students are also expected to actively participate (through several means of expression) as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of literacy communities

As a whole, these objectives will allow you to develop and hone your “toolboxes” for both analysis and synthesis that will then be relevant and useful in other courses and beyond.

Assignments

- **Short Papers (3): 20%**
 - For these (2-4 page), papers you are expected to provide an initial analysis of your reading of **dystopia at various stages of the course – the beginning, middle, and end.** In preparation for our discussion of the novel, **to which these papers are connected,** you should have completed this short paper that integrates course concepts and theories with the novel. At the end of class, you will have an opportunity to revise / add to your thinking and analysis.
- **Final Project (paper and presentation): 35%**
 - For this project, you will select a dystopian novel that you will read and analyze independently over the course of the semester. Your analysis will be in the form of a (10-12 page) paper that combines several elements of the **course that add to your understanding of the novel’s dystopian center.** These elements include literary theory, political theory, concepts of morality, and elements of the novel. During our final exam day, you will provide a short (10 minute) presentation of your analysis to your peers through a media format of your choosing (powerpoint, prezzi, film, social media website, etc.).

- **Group Project: 25%**
 - Over the course of the semester, you will meet in small groups to design and craft a **presentation** for the Utopian Studies Society, an interdisciplinary community that encourages thinking around concepts of utopianism in various forms. **Consider that conference accepts presentations around dystopian concepts as well. Thus, for this assignment, you will define and highlight one aspect/theme/thread of your understanding of dystopia to showcase for the class. This should be explored through multiple sources (fiction, film, photography, music, etc.) as the class has modeled for you over the course of the semester. During our final exam time, we will “attend” the conference.** Per the parameters of the call for conference proposals, you will be required to submit to me a 250-word abstract of your presentation. Extra consideration will be given to those groups who actually apply to the conference with their project in mind. You can learn more about the society and its annual conference here: <http://www.utopianstudieseurope.org/index.php>
- **Participation: 20%**
 - As evidenced by large and small group discussion, notes and annotations on readings. **However, as part of this participation grade, students will be required to look for relevant current (political) events, global phenomenon, and (pop) cultural instances that connect to the dystopian concepts discussed in class. Students will then have the opportunity to share these “events” – through various venues like visuals, clips, annotated news articles, etc. – with their peers at the start of class. This assignment serves as formal “evidence” that you are making connections between class and the larger world around you. Examples will be given the first day of class (for example: the reality TV show “Big Brother” is a reference to a dystopian concept. Why? What’s the connection here? Examples do not have to be as explicit as this one.)**

These assessments, both individually and collectively, allow you to see, link, and, most importantly, use the concepts, skills, and lenses used in the this class. Everything we do in class is both practice and preparation for these assignments, especially your paper and your group project.

Course Plan and Thematic Units (Tentative)

(Texts such as art, poetry, photography, and music will be infused throughout. Experiencing a theater production, if an opportunity presents itself, will be considered as well.)

Unit 1: Characterizing Dystopia: What is Utopia? What is Dystopia? (~2 weeks)

- Texts: *The Lottery*, selections from *Utopia*, film clips: *The Hunger Games*, selections from Foucault's *The Subject and Power* (essay)

Unit 2: “Everybody’s Happy Now”: Examining Extreme Power and Change from the Outside (~3 weeks)

- Texts: *Brave New World*, selections from Rousseau's *The Social Contract*
- Assignments: Short Paper 1

Unit 3: “Nasty, Brutish, and Short”: Examining the Absence of Power (~3 weeks)

- Texts: *Lord of the Flies*, selections from Hobbes's *The Leviathan*, film clips: *The Dark Knight*, *Bladerunner*
- Assignments: Short Paper 2, Final Project Proposal

Unit 4: “The Odds are Never in Your Favor”: Examining Extreme Power and Change from the Inside (~3 weeks)

- Texts: *V for Vendetta* (book and film), *Detropia* (documentary), selections from Locke's *Two Treatises on Government* and Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*, film clips: *I Am Legend*
- Assignments: Independent Paper Draft, Group Project Proposal

Unit 5: Challenging Politics and Power: Morality in the Dystopian World (and returning to our original characteristics and understanding of “dystopia”)(~2 weeks)

- Texts: *The Giver*, selections from Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, Merton's *No Man is an Island*
- Assignments: Short Paper 3
- Other essays: “Introduction” to *Brave New Worlds* by John Joseph Adams, *Dystopias: Definitions and Characteristics* from readwritethink.org, and *The Future Sucks: A Visitor's Guide to a Dystopia* by Maria Kramer

Unit 6: Lessons Learned: Final Projects (~2 weeks)

- Independent Paper Galley Walk
- Group Projects: Utopian Studies Society Conference, Dystopia Strand Presentations

possible, suggested texts to use for final project/independent paper

(* Note that many of these books, especially the contemporary ones, are the first in a series. While you are only required to read 1 book, it is a hope of mine that you will seek out the subsequent books after this course. So, pick something that interests you. Check out the Goodreads page on Dystopian fiction [here](#).)

<i>1984</i> by George Orwell	<i>Matched</i> by Ally Condie
<i>The Maze Runner</i> by James Dashner	<i>Under the Never Sky</i> by Veronica Rossi
<i>Snow Crash</i> by Neal Stephenson	<i>Eve</i> by Anna Carey
<i>The Uglies</i> by Scott Westerfeld	<i>Partials</i> by Dan Wells
<i>Divergent</i> by Veronica Roth	<i>Unwind</i> by Neal Shusterman
<i>The Stand</i> by Stephen King	<i>Across the Universe</i> by Beth Revis
<i>The Long Walk</i> by Stephen King	<i>Birthmarked</i> by Caragh O'Brien
<i>Battle Royale</i> by Koushun Takami	<i>The House of the Scorpion</i> by Nancy Farmer
<i>Gone</i> by Michael Grant	<i>Watchmen</i> by Alan Moore
<i>Delirium</i> by Lauren Oliver	<i>The Road</i> by Cormac McCarthy
<i>The Knife of Never Letting Go</i> by Patrick Ness	<i>Ender's Game</i> by Orson Scott Card
<i>Shatter Me</i> by Tahereh Mafi	<i>A Clockwork Orange</i> by Anthony Burgess
<i>Witch and Wizard</i> by James Patterson	<i>Fahrenheit 451</i> by Ray Bradbury
<i>Variant</i> by Robison Wells	<i>The Dispossessed</i> by Ursula Le Guin
<i>Oryx and Crake</i> by Margaret Atwood	<i>The Parable of the Sower</i> by Octavia Butler
<i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> by Margaret Atwood	<i>The Running Man</i> by Stephen King

Assessment: seeing, linking, using