Grim Visions in the Classroom: Dystopian Texts and Adolescent Readers

by: Michael A. Soares

The possibility of creating utopias, societies constructed and regulated for perfect and peaceful existence, has always fascinated us. We go to great lengths in the attempt to create our own utopian space, including getting an education, finding a high paying job, seeking a perfect mate for creating a perfect family, and even maxing out our credit cards to fund our paths to happiness. Conversely, for more than a century there has been an increasing cynicism in literature towards the idea of the utopia; infamous high profile attempts from Nazi Germany and Communist Russia to Jonestown, Waco, Texas, and North Korea have left us cautious and have inspired some of our greatest modern and contemporary authors to pen warnings. As a result, there are increasingly more dystopian-oriented novels being published, and they are often aimed at younger readers. In my classroom, the canonical "unholy trinity" of dystopian novels has been in the form of George Orwell's 1984, Aldous Huxley's Brave New World, and Yevgeni Zamyatin's We. Other writers have had younger readers in mind; authors such as Ray Bradbury with Fahrenheit 451 and short stories like "The Pedestrian," as well as William Golding with Lord of the Flies, created texts that have long been standards in the secondary school classroom. Other dystopian authors have taken a less direct and more science fiction/fantasy approach such as Ursula LeGuin with The Left Hand of Darkness and Madeleine L'Engle with A Wrinkle in Time. Successfully capitalizing on these works and entrenching themselves as dystopian vehicles functioning as adolescent literature are a flourishing wave of compelling and innovative texts. Among these are Lois Lowry's The Giver and its companion novels, the bestselling Hunger Games trilogy by Suzanne Collins, and the Among the Hidden series by Margaret Peterson Haddix. As a high school literature teacher, I have long taught the classics in my upperclassmen secondary courses. However, due to the advent of the recent proliferation of popular adolescent dystopian texts, I have had to reevaluate my pedagogical approach to acknowledge that students are coming into my classroom already cognizant of the genre. Although my canonical trilogy has informed these newer texts aimed at adolescents, the genre has taken a life of its own and is ripe with possibility for immediate classroom applications and future connections to later readings. Therefore, far from being merely an introduction to adult dystopian texts, these recent dystopian works comprise a genre which exposes adolescents to lessons about the self and raises serious questions about important issues such as free will and ideas, individuality, the onslaught of technology, and even death, all of which are tightly controlled in the prevailing totalitarian societies.

A rudimentary understanding of the long tradition and goals of dystopian literature lends itself to recognizing how its imperatives have filtered through to its adolescent-oriented progeny. Generally, 1984 and Brave New World tend to be the most celebrated adult dystopian novels of the 20th century. Brave New World was published in 1932 and predates 1984, published in 1949. Despite the space of one and a half decades and the tumultuous world events separating the publication of the two novels, there are strong similarities and shared influences which weave a common thread and in turn influence later novels, including Fahrenheit 451 in 1953. While dystopian literature is not new, it seems that the 20th century was a particularly rich period for such texts, stirring in Europe with We in 1924, traveling from Communist Russia with Ayn Rand's Anthem (first published in England in 1938), and taking root in the North America with Sinclair Lewis' It Can't Happen Here in 1935 and later with Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale in 1986. The majority of these dystopia-oriented novels are a reaction, in part, to the tension between society and technology. Obviously, the attempt by authors to envision futures carefully controlled by various methods is a step in this direction, serving as projections of what could be, and prompting us to make educated guesses about which direction society should proceed and the dangers of the technology taking us there.

In the 21st century age of the Homeland Security Act, and in the interest of our safety, democratic citizens are willing to relax vigilance about their constitutional rights and to allow technology collecting sensitive data about themselves in the interests of antiterrorism. Fictional dystopia societies often are a result of unfettered technology, yet it is the advent of technology that enables the control necessary to maintain order in the society (while simultaneously remaining its victim). Likewise, the sudden absence of technology is problematic, as evidenced in Lord of the Flies. In this novel, boys stranded on an island away from adults and technology quickly regress from the conventions of society and, in the process, find that lack of organization reverts them to a primitive culture. Adolescent readers, who will identify with the younger characters and their prejudices of adults, bullies, and other forms of social structure for adolescents, will also recognize the tension of the civilized and the primitive illustrated by Golding in the struggle for the conch. Likewise, the children attempting to maintain order must endure conflict over the eyeglasses, the only technology available to any of them, with those embracing anarchy. Order, an ultimate goal of any society, is very rarely achieved among humans except for by force, which, of course, is the key message of dystopian literature.

Perhaps the best example of recent adolescent dystopian literature is Lois Lowry's The Giver, the 1994 Newbery Medal novel, which succeeds by carefully building its narrative to fulfill the reader's expectations of a failed utopia and then subverting expectations by thrusting its protagonist into a pubescent awakening of imagery and emotions. Published in 1993, the novel proposes a society in a post-apocalyptic future that minimizes human ad-
vancement, yet exploits the labor and skills of its inhabitants necessary to maintain the status quo. This recurrent theme of dystopian literature is easily recognized by the adolescent reader and is particularly evident when held against M. Keith Booker’s assertion in The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature (1994) that, “The principle technique of dystopian fiction is defamiliarization; by focusing their critiques on society on spatially or temporally distant settings, dystopian fictions provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable” (p. 19).

As technology has increasingly become a factor in our lives, what was once viewed as positive improvements in society has taken “a dystopian turn in recent years” (Booker, 1994, p. 17). Furthermore, dystopian literature shows an “attitude toward future technology that is ambivalent at best” (Booker, 1994, p 18). Therefore, the suggested trend that humans have become suspicious of the very technology that they advance is a key factor in the development of the genre. Adolescents, exposed to dystopian literature while fully immersed in rapidly changing technology, are able to see patterns unique to their experiences. For example, adolescents are likely to experience a range of activity from absorbing computer skills during K-12 years in order to compete later on in the workplace to buying and using equipment for the latest video game system craze. As a result, young readers will have an ideological balance of technology and its implications for human existence. Once adolescents have the tools to evaluate and predict the effects and pitfalls of technology, they will be better equipped to make decisions that will benefit the future of society.

Unfortunately, high school students have often in the past been immersed into a dystopian world, such as 1984 or Brave New World, without any prior introduction to the genre. Therefore, with the influx of popular dystopian literature specifically written for adolescents, the exploration and literary study of dystopian literature begins in late grade school, junior high or early high school with these novels. Elements characteristic of the dystopian novel presented in The Giver series, the Hunger Games novels, the Matched trilogy by Ally Condie, the Maze Runner trilogy by James Dashner, and other recent dystopian adolescent texts, in addition to addressing immediate concerns of adolescent students, establish for the reader a foundation for the intensified effort to read and comprehend the more rigorous, often more mature, and undoubtedly more politically charged texts in later study. Already established in textual criticism as a successful dystopian novel for adolescents, The Giver paves the way for more demanding texts, further developing the skills of students beginning to recognize and critique the operating elements of the fictional dystopia and preparing them to render comprehensive readings which will enable a literary bridge towards concepts in the world around them, fulfilling a function the dystopian novel seeks to accomplish.

According to Carol McGuirk’s “NoWhere Man: Towards a Poetics of Post-Utopian Characterization” (1994), part of the success of dystopian literature is in the characterization, and the “visionary mid-point” is where “ironic conflicts between symbolic heroes are fully dramatized” (p. 144). No better example exists than that of The Giver which succeeds not just as a dystopian text but as a novel in its ability to access several levels of comprehension at once. The story involves a community so long under a tightly controlled totalitarianism that individuals have lost all sense of individuality, so much in fact that members of the community are unable to distinguish individual colors. Since the setting depicts a possible distant future, it is readily described as a world where the past has been necessarily forgotten in order to maintain a strict control on the present. The problem is that the past cannot be completely ignored (arguably contradicting Orwell’s warning, “Who controls the past controls the future”). Accordingly, one member of the community must be chosen to be the “Recevier.” The Receiver’s job is to receive the memories of humanity’s past, including all the joys as well as the hurts, and to bear all emotional burdens in order to spare the general populace. The current Receiver is failing with age and Jonas, a twelve-year old boy, is chosen to replace him. The Receiver then becomes the Giver, and the memories of the collective human experience are transferred to the boy. In a reaction rife with consequence for the community, the new Receiver, his humanity awakened by the memories, realizes that memories are necessary for his people and, ultimately, plots to return the memories to their rightful owners.

The elements of dystopia are simultaneously evident and subtle in the case of The Giver. Jonas, the Giver-to-be, realizes that he has not had the opportunity in his life to “select,” even when it comes to his own clothing. “It’s the choosing that’s important, isn’t it?” asks the Giver (Lowry, 1993, p. 98). Like in all dystopian scenarios, the individual is stripped of choice. Jonas will ultimately defy his community and change the course of its destiny by choosing to betray his position and restore memories to the people. The unpredictability of adolescent behavior is not an uncommon generalization. According to Stanford Lyman in Roads to Dystopia (2001), “Minors and their antics seem to be unavoidable. As William L. Prosser pointed out more than three decades ago, ‘Children, as is well known to anyone who has ever been a child, are by nature unreliable and irresponsible people, who are quite likely to do almost anything’” (pp. 256-257). Conversely, younger readers are generally sophisticated enough to recognize a novel’s fictional account of quashing the urge to choose, effectively creating dystopias through the suppression of human behavior. Lyman (2001) continues, albeit tongue-in-cheek, “However, even if a haven from the heedless acts of youthful rebellion is not ever to be found, people will have other reasons for pursuing their search for community” (p. 257).

Perhaps the most telling element of a dystopia is the restriction
of books. Says the Giver to the new Receiver, “You and I are the only ones with access to the books” (Lowry, 1993, p. 102). The Giver informs Jonas that life will be difficult in part because of his access to books and his inability to discuss them with anyone, even a wife, because they are forbidden to the rest of the population. In totalitarian governments, from Nazi Germany to modern day Iran, the restriction of books and their ideas has stood as a symbol of repression. In fictional dystopian universes, among the most vehement arguments against book banning is Fahrenheit 451 where books are found out and subsequently burned by “firemen.” At the end of the novel, the very survival of texts exists in the memories of those who commit a book to memory, with one person per book. Conceivably, someday the knowledge and memories contained in the memorized books can be returned to the community at large, much like the plan of Jonas. In 1984, books are eradicated by the diminishing of the language itself. Newspeak is a concept that seeks to remove superfluous words until a handful of words is sufficient to describe anything at hand. In Brave New World, the Controller is the only one with access to books. Actually, the Controller is quite learned and is able to use text against its own purpose: to diminish knowledge. When he debates the virtues of Shakespeare with John the Savage, the Controller says “The world’s stable now. People are happy; they get what they want, and they never want what they can’t get...But that’s the price we pay for stability. You’ve got to choose between happiness and what people used to call high art. We’ve sacrificed the high art” (p. 150). Whether it is Kira artistically stitching story-telling tapestry in Gathering Blue or the rebellion inspiring “burning dress” of The Hunger Games, in all dystopian scenarios the possession or ability to create art introduces an unstable element to a controlled community, and the creative component is readily stamped out.

Privacy is another victim of the dystopia. Two instances occur in The Giver when Jonas notices that he has the ability to turn off the surveillance equipment that normal citizens are subjected to in the community. Adolescents, and in particular high students, will relate to this particularly well in this day and age of omnipresent video and camera. Many high schools across America routinely tape hallway activity, and this phenomenon was further increased by recent violence of the last few years in various parts of the country, and in particular Columbine. Students picking up on the significance of loss of privacy will be prepared to face the world of Winston Smith who is constantly watched by Big Brother in 1984. Winston is never allowed to be alone, whether it is at work, in bed, or talking a walk through the woods. He is constantly monitored, and is even singled out and chastised when he fails to perform his morning exercises to his television instructor’s satisfaction. In every possible location is a telescreen that not only transmits images and sounds but also acts as a camera monitoring activity. When Winston first visits Inner Party member O’Brien in his office, he, like Jonas in The Giver, notices that the viewscreen is able to be shut off - a privilege of authority in the hierarchical structure of the community. The concept of subjection to television and control through media is also evident in other dystopian novels, from Montag’s wife’s reliance on television in Fahrenheit 451, to the “feelies” of Brave New World, to the carefully orchestrated Hunger Games broadcast as propaganda.

The concept of the “individual” is ultimately at stake in the dystopian novel. As adolescents are struggling to establish their individuality in society, the dystopian culture is seeking to strip everyone of it. For example, in The Giver, Jonas realizes, “He had seen a birthday party, with one child singled out and celebrated on his day, so that now he understood the joy of being an individual, special and unique and proud” (p. 121). Such a concept is foreign to the denizens of 1984, where one is either a member of the Inner or Outer party with its various privileges or merely a prole. Identity is also essential in Brave New World, where one has been biologically and socially engineered to be identical in function and temperament to a particular class. Even in Zamyatin’s We, people are reduced in nomenclature to numbers. Similarly, in a society like the United States where many of us are identified in many ways by social security or driver’s license number, it seems plausible that a disassociation takes place when people feel as if they have been depreciated.

Death is another concern for adolescents, and it is often approached directly in dystopian novels. For example, in The Giver, the “release” is performed on those no longer or never able to serve the community. For the adolescent, one’s concept of worth is paramount to the experience of connecting to the dystopian novel because many may feel that they have no place or function in society. For example, The Hunger Games series features a president, a person of considerable power in a society, who literally reeks of death and is instrumental in the destruction of characters who are in his way or are inconsequential to his agenda, further acknowledging the disconnect with which adolescents must contend. In later high school, students may encounter Brave New World where people are kept physically perfect until a certain age and are then recycled in the Slough Crematorium with the essence of one’s body is reduced to recaptured materials that are then reintroduced into the economy. Such a position will resonate with adolescents as they go through the transformations, which will turn them into creators of the future. Adolescent dystopian novels therefore influence the metamorphosis into adulthood and provide messages about their function society and considerations of their value both in life and death which will hopefully inspire responsible future decisions.

Along with such issues is the assertion by Booker (1994) that “many critics consider dystopian fiction as a pop culture genre roughly the same category as science fiction; their dismissal of the genre can thus be partially attributed to an elitist rejection of popular culture” (p. 173). Teenagers, already experiencing feelings of alienation, may actually find the concept of dystopian fiction as appealing, even if from an apolitical point of view. Reading and interpreting such literature requires no political or ethical affiliation; it merely requires the examination of feelings and needs common to all and the need to ascertain their necessity in culture. Immersed in the dystopian genre, an adolescent might ask questions such as, “Can society survive without basic freedoms and emotions?” or “Is culture so constantly redefining what is necessary that we must slow down and take account of our lives?” Booker (1994) continues with, “The dystopian genre thus serves as a locus for valuable dialogues among literature, popular culture, and social criticism that indicates the value of considering these discourses together and potentially sheds new light on all of them” (p. 174). The dystopian genre draws upon a rich literary tradition and therefore blurs the boundaries of the genre, connecting to a multitude of other books familiar to younger readers, especially if the concept of adolescence itself is seen as dystopian. For example, in Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird, the class structure has provided for a hierarchy of white
culture; however, repression of the black community, while done for white utopian purposes, backfires and instead creates a dystopia of cultures, causing all to suffer (particularly the young, struggling to understand their world). Even Holden Caulfield in J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, who is seeking his way across New York City and metaphorically his life, is so enraptured by social mores, or a rejection thereof, that he is paralyzed to act. Furthermore, in Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, the seemingly utopian society—a society as close as one could imagine without any formal social constraints—is ultimately dystopian for Simon Stimson, who drinks to cope with and finally commits suicide to escape his social prison. Adolescents, in particular, who desire reality and accessibility in their reading, will find such boundaries appealing. Successful dystopian authors have followed suit with examples such as Jonas and Kira, providing viable comparisons for younger readers attempting to access dystopian text.

Lyman (2001) writes, “Current displacements of culture and economy have arisen at the same moment that consciousness of race, ethnicity, creed, gender, and sexual preference has surged. These new movements struggle to forge a different kind of community...” (p. 278). Such an assertion is the perfect recommendation for the adolescent rendering of dystopian text. Fortunately, because of recent quality texts like *The Giver* and its companion novels *Gathering Blue*, *Messenger*, and the recently published *Son*, as well as classics such as *Fahrenheit 451* and *Lord of the Flies*, there is precedent for success. Students, familiar with the intricate characteristics of the fictional dystopian society will be pre-disposed to gain the maximum benefit from more mature, and perhaps more political, dystopian works. Ultimately, the world changes and the literature with it; those who pay attention will be the ones who make the most of any given circumstances and develop positive contributions in forging the future. Adolescents, in the thick of these changes, are therefore the perfect candidates for the study of newer and more relevant dystopian novels being written as we continue into the 21st century.

References

Michael Soares has been a secondary English teacher for sixteen years and currently teaches at Pontiac Township High School in Pontiac, Illinois. He received his Master’s in Literature from Illinois State University and lives in Bloomington, IL.