

Dystopian fiction during the cold war

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Richard M. Nixon once said, The Cold War isn't thawing; it is burning with a deadly heat. Communism isn't sleeping; it is, as always, plotting, scheming, working, fighting. The Cold War was a period of high tensions that lasted from 1947 to 1991. The two sides of the conflict were the Soviet Union and its allies (supporters of communism) and the United States and its allies (supporters of democracy).

Each side of the Cold War aimed at spreading their ideologies to the rest of the world. The Soviet Union wanted to spread communism, while America wanted to spread democracy. This war was very different from previous wars, however, as it was not fought with actual warfare. Instead, the Cold War was fought via an arms race, the Space Race, and propaganda. In these ways, the Cold War dominated every aspect of society. In other words, it was a total war. In this total war, everything in America became about the war, from the treatment of suspected communists to entertainment. Many people were accused of being communists, and even though they were falsely accused, it greatly affected their lives. The movies that came out during the Cold War were almost strictly anti-communist propaganda.

In addition to movies, literature also represented American society during this time. The specific genre of literature that became highly popularized during the Cold War was dystopian fiction. This genre played off of the fears present in many people at that time. Three novels that came from this genre were 1984 by George Orwell, Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury, and Cat's Cradle by Kurt Vonnegut.

Each of these novels took a different perspective on a similar topic: fear and its impact on society. Impacts of the Cold War on Society The war against communism had a massive impact on Western society. During the Cold War, everything in America was about the war. This high involvement of society had numerous effects on America. During the Cold War, the lack of trust among citizens was extremely high. This was due to the fear of communism taking over. This fear was perpetuated by the Domino Theory—the idea that a communist government in one nation would quickly lead to communist takeovers in neighboring states, each falling like a perfectly aligned row of dominos. It caused everyone to be suspicious of nearly everyone else. Propaganda was one major ploy used to fight the Cold War and, furthermore, the ideology of communism in general.

One major form of propaganda was modernism. Modernism is essentially a partition from tradition. During the Cold War, broad segments of the American culture and political establishment—including the federal government itself—tentatively welcomed modernism, finding it an effective propaganda weapon. Modernism was used to shape the world's view of democracy, but it also shaped America. Although the tactic was originally used to subtly attack communism, it also changed the culture of an entire nation. The prevalence of anti-communist propaganda during the Cold War reached even into American entertainment. One example of this was found in the cinema. Many critics see motion pictures from the Cold War era as allegories that offer disguised comment on American politics in the 1950s—that is, the threat of domestic communism. The majority of movies being released during this time period were about exactly that—the threat of

communism on America. Another example of the impact of the Cold War on society is found in literature. Similar to the cinema, the fear of communism found its way into many authors' literary works. In fact, a relatively new literary genre was popularized due to the Cold War—dystopian fiction.

Dystopian fiction is said to have been first introduced in 1921 with the writing of *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin. *We* greatly impacted dystopian fiction and how we know it today. This novel introduced the idea of a future with an oppressive government and suppressed individuality. Many more dystopian fiction novels followed *We*, especially during the Cold War. Three of these novels were *1984*, *Cat's Cradle*, and *Fahrenheit 451*.

1984 by George Orwell was published in 1939. While the novel isn't from the Cold War era, it did come from a place of fear of the future, as it was published shortly before World War II. These fears that were present before World War II are parallel to those present during the Cold War. *1984* is about a not-so-distant future in which the world is a drastically different place. It follows Winston Smith, who constantly deals with a society in which individuality is not only frowned upon, but prohibited by the government, also called Big Brother. Big Brother is constantly watching and controlling every aspect of society. They even create a new form of English that eliminates people's way to present independent thoughts. Throughout the story, Winston desperately searches for a way to retain his individuality. To do this, he begins keeping a diary and starts a secret romance with Julia. Both characters are strongly against Big Brother. In the end, they are caught

and taken to the Ministry of Love, a prison. Winston and Julia are each tortured and eventually give up their humanity by betraying each other.

1984 contains many aspects similar to *We*, which means that it fits in the dystopian fiction genre. One example is the oppressive government. Big Brother controls every aspect of everyday life and watches everything. They create the language by which people communicate, decide the beliefs held by the population, and use entertainment to surveil citizens. Additionally, in 1984, there is no artistic expression in any form. Simply writing in a diary, which is what Winston did, is a terrible crime. Lastly, in the society created by Orwell, self-expression and individuality are restricted. Winston's diary was in defiance with this, as he used it to reflect on life and question the government.

George Orwell wrote 1984 just before the outbreak of World War II. This time was filled with fear of the coming war and people who were constantly full of suspicion. Even though this book was written prior to the Cold War, it very accurately represents how people felt during that time. Orwell wrote, If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face forever. This is similar to how Americans felt about communism. They believed that the level of sameness involved in communism would stomp out their individuality.

Cat's Cradle was written in 1963 by Kurt Vonnegut. This novel is essentially a satire about the arms race during the Cold War. The story is narrated by Jonah, or John. He sets out to write a story following prominent people in America at the time of the atomic bomb explosion. In doing this, he comes

into contact with the children of one of the co-creators of the atomic bomb. Throughout his journey, he comes into contact with new religions, new governments, and new forms of technology. The end of the novel shows the new theme to be about human stupidity. Many themes are explored throughout *Cat's Cradle*, such as technology and religion. Technology is discussed at great lengths for the whole of the story.

According to the story, science was originally meant to help humanity. However, when scientists discovered the technology and had the ability to save human lives, they used it to take life instead. This technology is the atomic bomb. The novel also discusses religion, and, specifically, the failures of religion. Christianity and its message is essentially ignored by humanity. Instead, the religion is distorted so that it is aligned with the military and evil. The religion that takes the place of Christianity is called Bokononism. Bokononism is a mockery of religion in general. Its purpose is to focus on people rather than a deity. The leader is candid about creating a religion filled with lies. In fact, the rules of Bokononism change daily. When he is unable to come up with something new, he suggests suicide.

Cat's Cradle is very direct in its relation to the Cold War. While the other two examples focus on fear, this book focuses on the literal byproducts of the Cold War—the effects of the atomic bomb and the arms race. It shows that the fears of the time period weren't completely unfounded.

Set hundreds of years from now, *Fahrenheit 451* is a novel about a future where books are illegal. Guy Montag, a fireman, is the main character. However, in this alternate future, firemen are responsible for burning the

homes of anyone caught hiding books. Montag is married to a woman who is completely immersed in and addicted to interactive television, among other things. When he meets Clarisse, who is the complete opposite of most people in their society, he starts questioning his life. This eventually leads him to take a book that he is supposed to be burning. He comes to the realization that, There must be something in books, something we can't imagine, to make a woman stay in a burning house; there must be something there. You don't stay for nothing. Later, Montag's captain, Beatty, visits him in his home after he doesn't go to work. Captain Beatty reinforces the idea that reducing individuality is imperative to society, and books encourage individuality. After reading and discussing books with new friends, Montag becomes appalled by the ignorance in his society and in his own home. When Montag is eventually forced to destroy his books, he decides to kill Beatty and run. At the end of the story, Montag meets a group whose goal is to one day recreate literature from memory so that books are freely available.

Many themes are explored in Fahrenheit 451, some of which are technology, censorship, and government. Technology is the main antagonist in this story. Its main purpose is to take the place of individuality, free thought, and free expression. It also aims at taking away real communication and relationships. We see this in the preoccupation with things like the interactive television. Another theme in Fahrenheit 451 is censorship. This is an obvious and very straightforward theme. The government essentially got rid of literature and replaced it with entertainment of their creation in an attempt to censor what ideas entered the population. This leads directly into

the theme of government control. Everything was ordered and directed by the government, even the material shown on television. This complete control allowed them to prevent any new or extreme ideas from circulating. All of these themes strongly reflect the culture and society during the Cold War.

Fahrenheit 451 represents American society during the Cold War in many ways. The first issue during that time period was censorship in the Soviet Union and other communist countries. Books that were anti-communist were burned, similar to in Fahrenheit 451. Though the majority of censorship did not take place in America, there was still fear. This fear was that censorship in one country would eventually lead to mass censorship, or, as mentioned earlier, the Domino Theory. Another issue was government.

In fact, the tensions of the Cold War were due to different ideologies about government. The fear of the government—whether of communism or capitalism—was very similar to the fear in the novel. Conclusion In America, every aspect of society reflected what was going on in the Cold War, including social interactions and entertainment, such as movies and literature. The specific genre of literature that became widely popular, dystopian fiction, contained many books that displayed the fears of many Americans.

Overall, the Cold War was a time of high suspicion and tension worldwide.