

Dystopian literature

Literature



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A dystopian novel holds the power to not only engage a reader in a fantasy world, where life is vastly different from our own, but to speculate as to the reality of this future for mankind. Dystopian literature is first and foremost a warning designed by an author, built from issues of the present. Some of the most famous novels of all time are from a dystopian viewpoint; take *War of the Worlds* by H. G Wells for example. The texts I have examined are *The Handmaids Tale*, by Margaret Atwood and *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes.

The power and impact on the reader on these text lies within its dystopian setting and therefore its ability to warn for the future, but are these predictions believable, and if so, do people really take these words of warning into account? Dystopian literature is built off the issues surrounding society at the present, and is a creative exploration of the possible consequences for the future. A dystopia is not a happy future for all, and authors use this setting as a warning that there is bad to come if something does not change.

Atwood describes *The Handmaids Tale* as “speculative fiction”, meaning what she warns is what could happen if society remains aloof to what is happening in the world. Dystopian literature can often become a reflection of the current society, exemplified. An example of this from Margaret Atwood’s, *The Handmaids Tale*, written in the 1980’s when feminism was a peak issue of society. Atwood predicts women of the next generation would forget the feminist fight and struggles for equality, expecting rather than demanding equality.

Atwood's dystopia explores the idea that this would leave the next generation open to a slipping of women's rights and subdued willingness to fight for these rights, ultimately leaving women defenceless and yet again of a lower social status than that held by men. The fact that an issue at the forefront of people's minds in the 1980's is rarely discussed today, and having equal rights to men is an expectation by the current generation, makes Atwood's insight all the more powerful. Through speculative fiction, basing predictions of the future of the events of the present a dystopia appears all the more real and influential to the reader.

When events of the present are expanded and described in depth as implications for the future, the warning within the text becomes a very powerful tool. Dystopian literature is so powerful and compelling simply because the reality of the authors words keep us reading. A dystopia is labelled a warning for a reason; there is a very real chance that the events the authors describe can become a reality. Dystopian literature can easily fall into the all too close category of science fiction. The distinguishing factor between the two genres: possibility.

If an audience can see the possibility of the events an author describes, there's a warning and chance it could become a reality. Take Charlie in *Flowers for Algernon*, who was given experimental surgery to transform him from mentally disabled, to a genius. Possible? The technology and ever increasing knowledge and advances for the human race means under the knife we can transform our bodies, acquire new organs and cure life threatening diseases. Why not enhance intelligence; it seems just the next step in our ever evolving and improving society.

All the more chilling, Atwood states in writing *The Handmaids Tale*, “ One of my rules was I couldn’t put anything into the novel that human beings hadn’t already done before”. The fact that the events of her dystopia are not only possible but have already happened seems far too close for comfort, and makes the warning all the more real. Dystopian novels are very real, very possible threats that make this kind of literature so powerful and influential because the reader has no choice but to feel the reality of their words.

In theory, dystopian literature is a very powerful predictive and society questioning tool for authors. There is no doubt that a dystopia is a possibility and therefore a warning, and the basis on events from the present leading to this kind of future is very compelling. However, no matter the power of these tools and the fact that a warning is in the text, do people really pay attention to these predictions? Take the *Handmaids tale* for instance; centred around a society where men hold all the power, society is de-modernized and women have severely restricted rights. Sound familiar?

This has already happened in Iran, and despite Atwood’s warnings, nothing has happened to stop it, nor is there any way to affirm it couldn’t happen to another country in the future. There’s also her warning about feminism, Atwood speaks of the future generation taking for granted what those before fought so hard to gain. Being a part of the future generation, there is a very blase attitude to the rights of women today, it is an expectation women will be treated equally to men, rather than a battle fought and won. There is, it appears, no one taking her words into deep consideration and doing anything about it.

The same can be said about Daniel Keyes warnings in *Flowers for Algernon*, about tampering with the way we were put on earth and the idea of artificial intelligence through science. The warnings are there, that there are often side effects and always consequences that come with meddling in what ought not to be meddled in, his example being human intellect. Despite the warning, if a way of enhancing ones intellect was truly discovered, it would be a desired and sought after procedure, certainly not shied away from, despite Keyes warnings.

It is clear that dystopian literature is a powerful tool of warning in theory. The warnings and predictions are certainly an excellent scare tactic and it is often uncanny how accurate an author can be, however are their words really taken into account. Dystopian warnings are really nothing more than words on a page, to be read, pondered-maybe worried about for a short time- and eventually forgotten. It can be argued that dystopian literature finds its strength in its warnings hidden between the lines.

There is no doubt that reading a dystopic novel, the reader almost certainly can see the possibility of this future and these novels are extremely scary glimpses of what the future may hold. However if dystopian literature really were a powerful tool of warning, wouldn't people take more notice and do something about the warnings and approaching reality sitting before them. Dystopian literature is very compelling to read because the reality is harsh and impossible to ignore whilst reading the novel.

A thrilling journey to the future, dystopic novels may find their audience appeal and pull through the predictions, but the strength of their warnings are no enough to combat what these authors are warning against. No one

does anything about the warnings in these novels, and even though it is apparent the authors often predict with uncanny accuracy, this warning falls flat and in the end, these authors can only claim their novel as an ‘ I told you so’ rather than prevention tools. A warning can only be as powerful as those willing to do something about it.