

The issues with human progress in utopian and dystopian fiction



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Krishan Kumar claims that HG Wells “ never wrote a proper utopia, in the strict sense”. This may seem a paradoxical statement in regards to the author famed for being the leading apostle of science utopias, and lends itself to the question: “ what is a utopia ‘ in the strict sense’?” The term coined by Thomas More in his 1516 novel Utopia has a double meaning. The word is derived from the Greek οὐ τόπος, meaning “ no place”, though the English homophone “ eutopia” is derived from the Greek εὖ τόπος, meaning “ good place”. In this sense a true utopia can be interpreted to mean the dream of a place that is perfect, but also unattainable. Wells seems acknowledge this in his novel A Modern Utopia through the phrase, “ Utopias were once in good faith projects for a fresh creation of the world and of a most unworldly completeness; this so-called Modern Utopia is a mere story of personal adventures among Utopian Philosophies.” Wells’s depiction of society is that of “ Utopian Philosophies” put into practice and as a result there are flaws - in fact there is a chapter dedicated to “ Failure in a Modern Utopia.” In acting out utopian dreams we inevitably encounter imperfections, and from this the “ Anti-Utopia”, or dystopia is born. The twentieth century saw a shift from a Victorian interest in utopia towards a marked increase in dystopias and Wells’s A Modern Utopia (1905) is a pivotal moment in this transition from dreams to the practical limitations of reality.

William Morris’s News from Nowhere (1890) is an example of the utopic dream. Humanity has reached a point of fulfillment where happiness and beauty are ubiquitous, evil is almost non-existent and even the hardships of labor have become a pleasure: “ The more you see of us, the clearer it will be to you that we are happy. That we live amidst beauty without any fear of

becoming effeminate; that we have plenty to do, and on the whole enjoy doing it... [England] is now a garden, where nothing is wasted and nothing is spoilt, with the necessary dwellings, sheds and workshops scattered up and down the country, all trim and neat and pretty." This passage's description of a garden with nothing but happiness and beauty is reminiscent of the Garden of Eden; it looks away from Morris's contemporary Victorian industrialism in an attempt to reclaim the world as it was before the fall. Morris is well aware that his utopia is impossible to achieve, and the title's description of this world as " Nowhere" clearly shows this intended irony. HG Wells is somewhat critical of creating an inaccessible paradise: " Were we free to have our untrammelled desire, I suppose we should follow Morris to his Nowhere, we should change the nature of man and the nature of things altogether; we should make the whole race wise, tolerant, noble, perfect - wave our hands to a splendid anarchy, every man doing as it pleases him, and none pleased to do evil, in a world as good in its essential nature, as ripe and sunny, as the world before the fall." He believes it is more worthwhile to attempt to create a formula which steps away from the generalities of previous utopias in the direction of real human nature. Morris himself concedes that his Nowhere is not a vision or projection of the trajectory of human progress, but an idealised dream. Morris is able to reject any form of government or judicial system by removing any form of inherent evil from humanity. Wells, however, wishes to tread the line between idealism and a society that can be practically achieved without the need to modify human disposition: " Our proposal here is upon a more practical plane at least than that. We are to restrict ourselves first to the limitations of human possibility as we know them in men and women of this world today, and then to all the

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inhumanity, all the insubordination of nature." Wells's utopia may not be a traditional utopia, but its imperfections don't quite reach the point of dystopia.

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* extrapolates a few Wellsian ideas, projecting aspects of *A Modern Utopia* far into the future and displaying his concern over how a society of this form may fail. The title is a quotation from Miranda in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "O, wonder! / How many goodly creatures are there here! / How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world, / That has such people in't!" There is dramatic irony in this passage in that many of the people Miranda sees here for the first time have been shown not to be such good-hearted men, and in her naivety she cannot conceive their flaws. By adopting this for the title of his novel, Huxley is commenting on the naivety of his contemporaries and those such as Wells who failed to see the negative possibilities of the way in which their culture was developing. Wells continued in the Victorian vein of believing in the continuous development of science and technology, but also the progression of government: "The State is to be progressive, it is no longer to be static". Huxley's extension of this is the assumption that society must inevitably reach a point of fulfilment, both in governance and mechanisation. The Controller, Mustapha Mond, voices this idea: "It's curious... to read what people in the time of Our Ford used to write about scientific progress. They seem to have imagined that it could be allowed to go on indefinitely, regardless of everything else." He believes that the constant drive to satiate desires through the development of technology leads us towards a distorted vision of happiness. Life becomes too easy, and as a result of this simple stasis emotion, passion and love are incompatible

with the culture of dulled pleasure. Huxley is concerned that the incessant mechanisation of humanity removes all the components of life's daily difficulties, but in the process it also removes the true beauties of existence: "Our world is not the same as Othello's world... you can't make tragedies without social instability", says Mond, "Universal happiness keeps the wheels steadily turning; truth and beauty can't." Huxley is criticising this very idea of happiness. It is a sterile existence, undeniably without pain and suffering, but also without the major influences that characterise human nature. The Controller tries to convince the Savage that this modern world is a utopia: "People are happy; they get what they want, and they never want what they can't get. They're well off; they're safe; they're never ill; they're not afraid of death; they're blissfully ignorant of passion and old age; they're plagued with no mothers or fathers; they've got no wives, or children, or loves to feel strongly about; they're so conditioned that they practically can't help behaving as they ought to behave. And if anything should go wrong, there's soma." Essentially he explains that the depths of life have been removed, but ignores the fact that the heights have been too.

It is in many ways reminiscent of *The Birth of Tragedy* in that Nietzsche claims societies with the most upheaval and sensitivity produce the finest works - true beauty and tragedy cannot be fulfilled unless the horrors of the Dionysiac spirit can be perceived. In response to this the Savage refutes this disfigured image of happiness and claims back human nature, "I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin." George Orwell aptly summarizes this in saying, "though everyone is happy in a vacuous way, life has become so pointless

that it is difficult to believe that such a society could endure". It is symbolic that the Savage returns to nature at the end of the novel, working the land by hand without the need for machinery. George Orwell believed that Huxley was aiming his criticism at "the implied aims of industrial civilisation," and this most clear in this reversal of progress and rejection of mechanization.

Thomas Hardy felt that industrialization detracted from humanity through its separation from nature, and this is made evident by the "engine-man" in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891): "His thoughts being turned inwards upon himself... hardly perceiving the scenes around him, and caring for them not at all; holding only strictly necessary intercourse with the natives... The long strap which ran from the driving wheel of his engine to the red thresher under the rick was the sole tie-line between agriculture and him." This introspective and callous attitude represents the tunnel vision of urbanization: progress for progress's sake without consideration for the flaws that modernity may bring. The worker is connected to the outside world only by a "sole tie-line" and this detachment leads to a lack of care. Huxley was writing forty years later than Hardy and it appears the march of mechanized progress had developed into an even more significant concern. Morris's *News from Nowhere* was published just a year before *Tess*, and conveys concerns with his contemporaries' progress in a decidedly different way to Huxley. Rather than projecting industrialization into the future and showing its follies, Morris's *Nowhere* is closer to a pastoral and paradisaical Arcadia of the middle-ages. Clive Wilmer states, "a dream set in a real or possible place may invite attention to the shortcomings of contemporary reality", and Morris's dream is unmistakably England. By placing the protagonist in a

place he knows well, but that has undergone much change, Morris is able to lucidly contrast his utopia with contemporary Victorian England, and thereby criticize the latter. The most evident difference is the rejuvenation of nature and reduction of mechanization: "The soap-works with their smoke-vomiting chimneys were gone; the engineer's works gone; the lead-works gone; and no sound of riveting and hammering came down the west wind from Thorneycroft's." Morris views this new world as purged of evil, and one of the primary reasons for this is that man is reunited with nature: "Was not their mistake once more bred of the life of slavery that they had been living? - a life which was always looking upon everything, except mankind, animate and inanimate - "nature", as people used to call it - as one thing, and mankind as another. It was natural to people thinking in this way, that they should try to make "nature" their slave, since they thought "nature" was something outside them." This complements Hardy's notion that industrialization causes a rift between man and nature, and that this rift can be the source of man's callous disposition in relation to progress.

In Morris's utopia humanity has come to accept its position as a part of nature, and this enables them to take pleasure in their work and thereby achieve happiness in all aspects of life - leisure and labor. By slowing the march of human progress to a standstill, Morris is able to criticize the blind forward movement of industrialization. One can criticize human progress by showing its folly in a dystopic world, but also by contrasting it to the perfect equilibrium of a static utopia. Labour saving machinery is taken to the utmost extremes in EM Forster's short dystopia *The Machine Stops* (1909). It is an early response to Wells's idea that machinery can be constantly

improved to the benefit of mankind. Machinery's aim was to make life easier and satiate humanity's everyday wants and needs; Forster imagines a society where this is taken to the furthest point, and as a result humanity has no desires outside of the Machine and exists in a static fulfillment achieved by mechanization. Human progress reaches a state where it has been consumed by technology and humanity has lost relationships with one another and nature. George Orwell describes the Machine as "the genie that man has thoughtlessly let out of its bottle and cannot be put back", and it is this fear of loss of control that Forster voices. Kuno, the protagonist's revolutionary son, tries to appeal to his contemporaries: "Cannot you see, cannot all you lecturers seem that it is we that are dying, and that down here the only thing that really lives is the Machine? We created the Machine, to do our will, but we cannot make it do our will now...The Machine develops - but not on our lines. The Machine proceeds - but not to our goal. We only exist as the blood corpuscles that course through its arteries, and if it could work without us, it would let us die." The death he refers to is not a literal loss of life, but a loss of control over the individual's own humanity. As technology replaces the age-old idea of bringing people to things with bringing things to people, the need to interact is negated. One can spend a lifetime in one room, only communicating via the Machine and being sustained only by the Machine. Humanity becomes consumed, and in the body of the Machine life is dulled. Forster is concerned with man's obsessive compulsion to replace life with technology: walking is replaced by airships (an extension of rail), communication by a form of video call (an extension of the telephone) and even music becomes synthetic (an extension of the radio). By displaying a world blurred by mechanization, he warns that the eagerness to adopt <https://assignbuster.com/the-issues-with-human-progress-in-utopian-and-dystopian-fiction/>

technology may lead to ruin: “ Man, the flower of all flesh, the noblest of all creatures visible, man who had once made god in his image, and had mirrored his strength on the constellations, beautiful naked man was dying, strangled in the garments that he had woven.” It is the naïve arrogance of human progress that Forster criticizes – the idea that man is so perfect, so divine that he can create a substitute for nature, for God.

The progress that George Orwell is concerned with is less related to technology. Jenni Calder claims, “ Orwell saw power politics, not science, as the major threat to mankind” and Orwell explains the defeat of the importance of science in Nineteen Eighty-Four: “ In the early twentieth century... science and technology were developing at a prodigious speed, and it seemed natural to assume that they would go on developing. This failed to happen, partly because of the impoverishment caused by a long series of wars and revolutions, partly because scientific and technical progress depended on the empirical habit of thought, which could not survive in a strictly regimented society. As a whole the world is more primitive than it was fifty years ago.” The Victorian and early twentieth century confidence in technology had been rattled by two World Wars and multiple revolutions. While mechanization was seen to be a threat, its force had been witnessed in the form of the atomic bomb and there was more belief in technologies capability for destruction than progress. Orwell thus feared more for the growing power of extremist governments.

During a brief period of the Second World War Orwell believed there could be a genuine movement towards equality, but in the post-War ashes he lost all faith. The Labour Government elected in England in 1945 did not effect the <https://assignbuster.com/the-issues-with-human-progress-in-utopian-and-dystopian-fiction/>

radical changes he wished for and his progress through Holland, France and Germany following the allied armies in 1945 shocked him to the core.

Nineteen Eighty-Four was a magnified projection of a present that contained Stalinism and an immediate past of Nazism; it is self-evident that Orwell was concerned that the future of humanity could fall into the hands of a draconian totalitarianist government. O'Brien captures the violence and oppression of this political progression in the line, "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face — forever." Brave New World's political system is form of milder totalitarian government that avoids the need for violent oppression by psychological and biological conditioning. The castes from World Controllers and Alphas to Epsilon semi-morons are a parody of HG Wells's idea of the Samurai, an educated ruling class, and the division of society into the Poietic, the Kinetic, the Dull and the Base. Wells was interested in the idea of "eugenics" based on theories developed in Darwin's Origin of the Species. This selective breeding to create an ideal society is extrapolated in Brave New World in that all babies are created to fit into a given caste. As a result of this, one of the fundamental human relationships - that between a mother and her child - is destroyed. "Viviparous" reproduction is regarded with such contempt even the word mother is considered an obscenity.

This breakdown of human relationship can be seen in The Machine Stops ("Parents, duties of," said the book of the Machine, "cease at the moment of birth. P. 422327483") and Nineteen Eighty-Four: "Nearly all children nowadays were horrible. What was worst of all was that by means of such organizations as the Spies they were systematically turned into

ungovernable little savages, and yet this produced in them no tendency whatever to rebel against the discipline of the Party. On the contrary, they adored the Party and everything connected with it... All their ferocity was turned outwards, against the enemies of the State, against foreigners, traitors, saboteurs, thought-criminals. It was almost normal for people over thirty to be frightened of their own children." The childrens' loyalty to the party but hatred towards even their own parents is an example of how the Party channels relationships between individuals into a single relationship with the state. Communicating, even thinking and feeling, become irrelevant concepts. The one remaining relationship - between the State and its citizens - is the relationship between power and its victims. As familial love is removed from society it remains that passionate, sexual love is also be negated. Sexual promiscuity in Brave New World is encouraged to the extent that it removes any affiliation between the physical act and an emotional connection. Sex becomes mechanical; Lenina even describes herself as "pneumatic", while rubbing her thighs.

DH Lawrence, writing at a similar time, laid down his opinion about his contemporaries and sex in *A Propos of Lady Chatterley's Lover*: " Culture and civilisation have taught us to separate the word from the deed, the thought from the act or the physical reaction. We now know that the act does not necessarily follow on the thought. In fact, thought and action, word and deed are two separate forms of consciousness, two separate lives which we lead. We need, very sincerely, to keep a connection." This distortion of sex is an idea Lawrence is very concerned with, and attributes much of the cause of it to be industrialization. The description of miners as " weird distorted,

smallish beings like men" in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is an example of dehumanization that Lawrence believes is a result of mechanization. Considered in this light, *Brave New World* can be seen to be concerned with the human progression of sexual relationships. In addition to portraying the soulless nature of sex, Huxley implies that the state fears that love could divide allegiances. An important factor of the totalitarian government is that society is of much greater importance than the individual. Love empowers individuals, and as a result the state wishes to eradicate that danger through excessive promiscuity. It is also a form of channeling any desire into harmless physical acts, rather than directing passion against the government. In the words of Calder, " Huxley visualises sex as a means of consuming excess energy, Orwell sexual repression as a means of generating it". The energy generated in Orwell's dystopia is directed away from the Party towards figures such as Goldstein, or the enemy powers of Eurasia or Eastasia. The Party's issue with sex was not merely that the sex instinct creates a world of its own which is outside their control; sexual repression builds into hatred that is transformed into " war -fever" and " leader-worship". Julia describes this: " The way she put it was: ' When you make love you're using up energy; and afterwards you feel happy and don't give a damn for anything. They can't bear you to feel like that. They want you to be bursting with energy all the time. All this marching up and down and cheering and waving flags is simply sex gone sour." There are mass rallies and public hangings and the Two Minutes Hate, and all these are outlets for sexual repression, while serving the double purpose of allowing the individual to forget himself and strengthen the power of the Party.

Distorting perceptions of sex and associating it with hatred diminish human relationships, and it is these relationships that make humanity what it is.

Humanity and morality are defined by relationships, and Winston comes to realize this: “ What mattered were individual relationships, and a completely helpless gesture, an embrace, a tear, a word spoken to a dying man, could have value in itself... The proles had stayed human. They had not become hardened inside... ‘ The proles are human beings,’ he said aloud. ‘ We are not human.’” This moment is epiphanic as he comes to the conviction that all the Party’s efforts to remain in complete control dehumanize the population. It is “ primitive emotions” that make up humanity, and the state forces these to be repressed and ultimately destroyed. Orwell shows a concern that human progress runs the risk of developing in such a political direction that society could become dehumanized. The object of political power in Oceania is to eliminate memory and self-consciousness in order to perpetuate political power, and by eliminating memory and self-consciousness one loses humanity. Party control forces repressed memories, isolation and destruction of connection; it eliminates human feeling. This loss of humanity is symbolized by the physical transformation that happens to Winston: “ A bowed, grey-colored skeleton-like thing was coming towards him. Its actual appearance was frightening, and not merely the fact that he knew it to be himself. He moved closer to the glass. The creature’s face seemed to be protruded, because of its bent carriage. A forlorn, jailbird’s face with a nobby forehead running back into a bald scalp, a crooked nose, and battered-looking cheekbones above which the eyes were fierce and watchful.” He is unrecognizable. He is not the traditional rosy color of life, nor the wan color

associated with death, but an inhuman grey. He has become misshapen and alien, just like his emotions and even appears similar to the survivors of a Nazi concentration camp. All sense of humanity, physical and emotional, has been drawn out or disfigured beyond recognition. The concerns of industrialization, the breakdown of human relations and political power are all united in that they are forms of dehumanization. I have shown how Orwell's dystopian politics destroy humanity, and how Forster's world becomes absorbed into machinery. In *Brave New World* it is evident that savagery has been removed, but so have the imagination and creativity that make up humanity. In a world of satiated desires "civilisation has no need of nobility or heroism. These things are symptoms of political inefficiency", says the Controller. It is this mechanical efficiency that leaves no room for the truth and beauty integral to human life. Even Morris's *News from Nowhere* criticizes a society that has separated itself from nature, and is therefore moving towards mechanization without emotion.

Overall these dystopias and utopias are a way of highlighting concern with their contemporary worlds by either contrast or projection of progressions that can already be seen. Most of these concerns of human progress in the early twentieth and late nineteenth centuries regard the fear that society's view of a better future runs the risk of developing too far from values that are vital to human happiness.