

Main themes in dystopia fiction

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The Evolution of Dystopia fiction: From fear to freedom

Dystopian fiction is a relatively new genre of literature that has evolved a significant amount since its emergence. *1984* is a novel that helped form the genre by presenting ideas that were previously unseen in literature. As we analyze novels that were published around and during the beginning of the 21st century, we can see there are many distinctions between the original dystopian fiction and modern dystopian fiction. The Hunger Games trilogy displays the themes and characteristics of a modern dystopian novel while still maintaining themes seen in *1984* and *Brave New World*. In order to understand the evolution of dystopian fiction, it is necessary to compare the purpose of modern dystopian fiction with the novels that shaped the genre.

Dystopias are usually characterized by totalitarian governments, poverty, and often environmental problems. These characteristics aren't found in all dystopian fiction although they are major themes that helped shaped the genre. In *1984*, the major plight of the citizens of Oceania stems from the control the government holds over them. People are not free to do anything but serve the government and if they hold allegiance to anyone other than Big Brother they face punishment. George Orwell, the author of *1984*, lived during a time when the fear of governmental control was immense. Before the publication of the novel, WWII showed the world that a government could be powerful enough to control millions of people and force them to act in accordance with the rules that government created, whether they disagreed or not. However, it wasn't only Nazi Germany that helped influence Orwell's dystopia in *1984* but also the control European countries had in less developed regions of the world. Orwell directly experienced the

dehumanization of people in impoverished countries as well as the control those in power held over lower class" individuals. At the time of its publication, 1984 served as a warning to readers about what the future could look like.

Technology has advanced substantially since the publication of 1984 and yet Orwell's concerns are more meaningful now than they were then. Most privacy concerns during Orwell's time stemmed from the fear of governmental spies and, possibly, telephone line tapping. It was because of the lack of technology that every day citizens were not afraid the government was monitoring them. Communication wasn't closely regulated and expressing anti-government ideas wouldn't always get you on a watch-list. 1984 served to warn people about how governmental control could increase with the advancement of technology. Big Brother is meant to be a looming figure that breeds distrust for the government and prevent compliance with technological breaches of privacy.

In order to fully understand the purpose of 1984 we have to look at it's reception. 1984 helped shape a genre of literature and also the discussions of privacy concern as technology develops. In their respective articles, Henry Giroux and Sören Preibusch provide different concerns that surround privacy breaches while maintaining the notion that a decrease in privacy due to technological advancement has had an overall negative effect on society. Giroux focuses on the "demise of democracy," similar to that in 1984, that could arise if privacy continues to be diminished and surveillance increases. He also argues that governments manipulate their citizens into believing a decrease in privacy is linked to safety concerns. He notes that "the
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destruction of privacy in the USA has been driven by an intensification of the fear of dissent" (Giroux 117).

When we look at modern dystopian fiction we can see that it serves less as a warning and more as an inspiration. For example, The Hunger Games trilogy's target audience is young adults with increased interest in the world they live in. This emphasizes the role modern dystopian fiction is meant to play in our society and helps to explain its increase in popularity. When a young adult looks at the state of the world, he or she sees extreme poverty, climate change, environmental problems, and corrupt governments, all contributing to the downfall of the human race. Modern dystopian fiction provides individuals with the hope that the decline of the state of our world does not mean that the end of everything is near. It gives young adults hope for the future and inspiration to work towards a world that isn't wrought by human destruction.

The 21st century has been defined by unimaginable technological advancement and with it came a complete lack of privacy. The absence of privacy was an issue many anticipated would arise as technology became prevalent in every aspect of our lives. In fact, the issue of privacy was a major theme in Orwell's 1984 and even as we analyze modern dystopian fiction, we can see that privacy has remained a theme throughout. However, the intent of the theme of privacy has changed as the genre evolved. When novels like 1984 were being written, the idea of technology reaching far enough to create privacy concerns didn't create overwhelming societal concern. When we look at our lives, privacy concerns are a major issue and many ethical questions have risen over governmental breach of privacy.

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Preibusch's arguments only serve to increase the validity of Giroux's concerns. Preibusch focuses on the individual by illustrating that although privacy concerns and distrust in powerful governments has increased worldwide "only a minority reported they had changed how they manage their personal data" (Preibusch 50). If no change occurs when privacy concerns increase, the likelihood of an undisputed surveillance state arising increases. The arguments presented by both authors reinforce the idea that the purpose of 1984 was to serve as a warning of a possible future. As Giroux points out, "Orwell's warning was intended to shed light on the horrors of totalitarianism and the endless regimes of state spying imposed on citizens" (Giroux 108).

As we entered the 21st century, Orwell's warnings became a reality. Preibusch reports that "Mass media have been reporting on global-scale state surveillance following former NSA contractor Edward J. Snowden's exposure of PRISM in June 2013" (Preibusch 48). "Big Brother Is Always Watching" is a phrase that is readily referenced when discussing governmental data collection and privacy concerns. We live in a world where most of the technological devices we use daily are equipped with a microphone and, usually, a camera. Accessing the microphone or camera on someone's phone or laptop is not difficult with the right combination of know-how and technology. It's because of this limitless access that governmental surveillance has become so prevalent.

We have seen in previous years that the issue of governmental surveillance has become a major public concern. This concern is reflected in the themes of modern dystopian fiction. In *Mockingjay*, a novel by Suzanne Collins, we

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are shown that Katniss is being constantly monitored by President Snow because he finds her to be a threat to the state of society. Although the idea of a government monitoring or attempting to silence someone who has acted against them isn't novel the use of technology to do so is. In the film adaptation of the novel, we are shown that President Snow is watching and listening to Katniss' every move. He even uses a video of her and Gale in an attempt to force her into submission. Katniss assumed she was having a private moment with Gale but instead President Snow showed her that she was always being watched. Anything that was once private became accessible by the government. In turn, President Snow gained power over Katniss by removing any aspect of privacy from her life.

Mockingjay accurately depicts the danger of governmental breaches of public privacy and the loss of autonomy that comes with it. Unlike 1984, however, Mockingjay isn't meant to provide warning to a possible future. Instead, the governmental privacy breaches found in Mockingjay serve as a reminder of the world we now live in. The Hunger Games trilogy was published during a time where conversations on governmental breaches of privacy were becoming very prevalent and concern was rising. For example, President Snow's constant surveillance of Katniss and knowledge on the details of her life is paralleled by the NSA's extensive data collection on individuals and organizations. Giroux notes that "Orwell never could have imagined that the National Security Agency (NSA) would amass metadata on billions of our phone calls and 200 million of our text messages every day. Orwell could not have foreseen that our government would read the content of our emails, file transfers, and live chats from the social media we use"

(Giroux 109). However, although governmental surveillance has increased significantly with the rise of technology, so has the growth of distrust in governments.

Revelations of governmental corruption have increased as privacy breaches become more widespread. Giroux notes that “ the revelations of government lawlessness and corporate spying by whistleblowers such as Chelsea Manning, Jeremy Hammond and Edward Snowden give new meaning – if not revitalized urgency and relevance – to George Orwell’s dystopian fable 1984” (Giroux 109). It’s interesting to see that commonalities between Edward Snowden and Katniss are plentiful, although Snowden did nothing to influence the characterization of Katniss. Both Katniss and Snowden worked to expose governmental dishonesty and corruption and, in turn, the governments they sought to expose attempted to remove them from the public eye. In *Mockingjay*, it is Katniss’ selflessness that brings down the Capitol and restores freedom. Although Edward Snowden is considered a fugitive by government officials, he is praised by many for his selflessness in revealing the state of governmental surveillance in the 21st century. Through both of their stories, we are given inspiration that governmental control doesn’t have to rule supreme.

It’s interesting to see that we have come so far technologically that Orwell’s idea of governmental surveillance seems so simple in comparison to the world we live in today. The reach of technology is so wide now that dystopian novels like *Mockingjay* serve less as a warning and more as an extreme representation of the societies we live in. People are impoverished, in 3rd and 1st world countries, climate change has led to the extinction of many

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species and corrupt and oppressive governments exist all around the world. For younger generations, this novel serves as an inspiration to improve the society they live in by recognizing its downfalls. Just like the characters in modern dystopian fiction, they don't have to accept the state of the societies they were born into. They can change their world for the better.

One major difference between older and modern dystopian fiction that emphasizes their purpose is how the endings of the novels play out. In 1984, Winston is left in the same place he was before. He's defeated and he has no choice but to accept the world he lives in. Big Brother holds so much control that even the idea of a rebellion is seen as a joke. On the other hand, in Mockingjay, Katniss ultimately defeats the Capitol and frees everyone from the control of the oppressive government. She lives to see the day that fear doesn't define everyday life. It's here that we can see a major difference in the purpose of the fiction as the genre evolved. One serves as a warning of a world where governmental control is so immense that there is nothing that could combat it and the other serves as an inspiration for overcoming governmental oppression and widespread destruction.

The genre of dystopian fiction has evolved immensely over the course of only a century. When we analyze the intent of the first dystopian novels we can see that they were meant to warn of a future full of societal destruction and governmental corruption. Modern dystopian fiction takes on a different view by reflecting the world we do live in. Its purpose is to serve as a hope for a better future. The increase in popularity of dystopian fiction, then and now, can be attributed to the state of society at the time and the experiences individuals in those societies had. Novels classified as dystopian <https://assignbuster.com/main-themes-in-dystopia-fiction/>

fiction have evolved in their purpose and in that evolution we can see a reflection of the evolution of the world we live in.