

# The dystopian trend in young adult literature

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Young Adult (YA) Dystopian Literature  
Introduction Over the last twenty years, Young Adult (YA) Dystopia has become one of the most popular teenage genres. This sudden rise in YA Dystopian literature has gained as much criticism as praise. Young adults are the future leaders of the world and books that are written for them always have a specific purpose.

YA Dystopian literature's purpose is to teach teenagers about the real world by using young protagonists. These books are very didactic; their message depends on the real world truth that the author wants to teach. Because of this dependence on the author's purpose, this genre changes a lot to keep up with the times. In order to fully understand this young genre, its two parent genres, Dystopian and YA, and their origins must be explored. In her book *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, Roberta Trites describes literature in three eras: Romanticism, where society was legitimized; Modernism, where the focus was placed on individuals; and Post-Modernism, where authors began to question how the government and society interacts with individuals (Trites 17). Dystopian literature was a product of the Romantic era, YA literature a product of the Modern era and YA Dystopian literature a product of the Post-Modern era.

The word Utopia comes from the Grecian words "not" and "place" ("Utopia," Origin). It has come to mean an imaginary, perfect place. Sir

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Thomas More was the first author to coin the term in his book *Utopia* (1516), but he borrowed the theory of a Utopian world from the philosopher Plato's essay *Republic* (Gueguen 47). More's successors followed his example by expanding the Utopian society and modernizing it, but the general idea that it revolves around social order, a Romantic literature idea, has remained constant. It has even been carried into Post-Modern False Utopia Dystopian literature. Dystopia, which literally means "bad utopia", did not become a popular literary genre until much later ("Dystopia," *Work Origin and History*).

The term was first used in a book by John Stuart Mills. Mills and his successors take problems that they see in their world and exaggerate them to create a worst case scenario in order to warn society about these problems. Rachel Fentin correctly labels them as "cautionary tales" (39). Authors do this by taking a problem in their modern society, exaggerating the problem and creating protagonists to fight whoever created this problem. This focus on the protagonist's rebellion, and more specifically on the recognition of problems not just within social systems, but humans themselves, marks it as a product of the Modern era.

Just like Utopian literature, and all other forms of literature, Dystopian literature has evolved over time as authors have been faced with new problems. YA literature, YA Dystopia's other parent genre, became popular in the Post-Modern era, specifically the 1950s-60s. As Trites explains, "the YA novel, with its questioning of social institutions and how they construct individuals, was not possible until the Post-Modern era influenced authors to explore what it means if we define people as socially constructed subjects <https://assignbuster.com/the-dystopian-trend-in-young-adult-literature/>

rather than self-contained individuals bound by their identities” (16).

Teenagers, who are beginning to question authority but are still contained by it, are the obvious choice for protagonists. Along with this focus on society and its influences on young individuals, YA books created a shift toward the use of easy to understand language and topics relevant to adolescents. Generally, YA protagonists are the same age as the intended readers and the book focuses on their journey of self-discovery.

YA literature’s evolution included not only a shift to modern themes, but a change in the general language and actions of modern young protagonists. YA Dystopian literature includes books that are set in worlds with fatal flaws, written in easy to understand language and centered on young protagonists. *The Giver*, written by Lois Lowry, was the book that started the YA Dystopian landslide. It was not the first book to introduce teenagers to pessimistic futures, but its success was dependent on the emotional connection that Lowry created between her protagonist and her young readers. Lowry’s dystopian world is a False Utopia, which means that the protagonist Jonas and the readers become aware of the problems in his society at the same time.

Emotion is the driving force of YA Dystopian literature, not the actual incidents (Bethune). Lowry and her successors understand this and have learned that by creating protagonists that are young and naive, then showing their realization of the dystopian world and their loss of innocence, they can draw in young readers. Today’s YA Dystopian literature has Lowry to thank for breaking traditions, but its topics have changed a great deal.

These changes tell a lot about how society has changed over the years. “ Pessimistic depictions of the future are now everywhere in popular culture.

Teens and teen books are not immune to larger trends in society” (Bethune).

All that YA Dystopian literature does, its main purpose, is it to teach teenagers about the real world. The biggest change that has occurred since *The Giver* is the shift from False Utopian to Post-Apocalyptic Dystopian books. False Utopian books like *The Giver* depict societies that seem perfect at first, but eventually turn out to be dystopian. Post-Apocalyptic books, for example Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games*, have protagonists who already understand that their worlds are not perfect. It is possible for books to have qualities of both dystopian worlds, but they generally end as Post-Apocalyptic.

For example, Jeanne Duprau’s book *The City of Ember* begins with a seemingly perfect world, that turns out to be falling apart, but at the end readers realize that it is set after a major environmental disaster; it is actually an Environmental Post-Apocalyptic Dystopia. This shift toward Post-Apocalyptic Dystopias can be explained just as the shift toward Dystopian literature as a whole is explained. As mentioned earlier, Dystopian literature follows the times. Every year there is a new prediction for when and how the end of the world will happen; it has become a “ what if” game (Howell 24). Authors use their books to offer readers possible answers.

As adolescents grow up, they naturally catch onto this what if game.

Teenagers want to know what would happen if someone their age had to live in a Post-Apocalyptic world. YA Dystopian themes themselves, unlike the type of books, have not changed much over the years. They have been

expanded to fit with the types but Unity, Division, Perfectionism, Environmental and Technology Dystopias have all remained prominent. Unity is one of the oldest themes in YA Dystopian literature. Unity is considered a Utopian characteristic.

Unity means that everyone is considered equal, socially and economically. Ralf Dahrendorf explains in his essay, "Out of Utopia: Toward a Reorientation of Sociological Analysis" that uniformity or "the existence of universal consensus on prevailing values and institutional arrangements" is used in Utopian literature to get rid of social conflicts (116). In Dystopian literature, governments create uniform societies because they are afraid of change and individuality (Dahrendorf 116). Unity Dystopias show readers what happens when government unification has gone too far. In *The Giver*, Jonas lives in a world where even colors have been taken away in an effort to make everything uniform. Equality is a good thing, but complete unity is not even possible.

A government that takes away citizens' rights, even for a good reason, can only be called a dictatorship. The purpose of these Dystopian books is to teach teenagers that uniqueness should be praised. On the opposite side of the spectrum from Unity Dystopias are Division Dystopias. In these books, the governments create barriers between citizens. In his essay? Dahrendorf mentions that citizens that are divided within Utopian societies are not oppressed by the government, but this is not true within Dystopian societies (116). YA Dystopian books either have governments that create boundaries because they want to either keep one group actively below another, like in

Malorie Blackman's *Naughts and Crosses*, or they want to keep the groups fighting within themselves, like in Veronica Roth's *Divergent*.

In both of these societies the governments use divisions to control the people. The purpose of Division Dystopias is the exact opposite of Utopian Dystopias; they teach teenagers that some unity is needed for society to function correctly. Modern societies need to find the balance between these two extremes. Perfectionism is another common Dystopian theme. The Urban Dictionary's definition of Utopia is, "[a] place in which there are no problems.

Everything is perfect" ("Utopia," Entry 2). Perfect is the key word.

Perfectionism, much like Unity, is a theme that has been taken from Utopian literature. False Utopian Dystopias play with this idea.; they present readers with a perfect world where there are no problems and then show how perfectionism does not equal happiness.

In False Utopian books, perfectionism is often defined first by the government. For instance in *Uglies*, by Scott Westerfeld, the government says that physical perfection is the more important than anything else, but Tally eventually learns that obsessing over looks is harmful. Post-Apocalyptic Dystopias either show humanity's struggle to regain a world that they deem perfect, or involves different parties struggling with their different ideas of perfectionism. *The Host* by Stephenie Meyer is a perfect example of this second type of Post-Apocalyptic Dystopia. The Souls are fighting to maintain a world without crime or pain, while the humans are fighting to regain a

world where they are free to make mistakes. The problem is that perfectionism is defined differently by everyone.

When one person achieves their idea of perfectionism, for instance they have achieved a society without crime, there are others who either grow bored with the world and decide to create “entertainment”, or they find out at what cost the government paid for perfectionism. Because whether it is paid in morality or blood, there is always a price. YA Perfectionism Dystopias teach teenagers that creating “the perfect image” is not the most important thing. Environmental and Technology Dystopian themes contrast each other. In Environmental Dystopias the environment is either considered primitive and evil, or has already been destroyed. An author’s purpose for writing an Environmental Dystopia is to remind the dystopian world and the reader that nature is not something to fear, but should be enjoyed and protected.

This is a clear choice for twenty first century Dystopias because of the numerous environmental problems in the modern world. Technology Dystopias are also heavily influenced by modern times. These societies are dependent on technology and it ruins them. The prevalent idea behind both of these genres is that nature is good and technology is bad. Their purpose is to warn against the over dependence on technology that is becoming a problem. In his essay “Literature of Utopia and Dystopia: Technological Influences Shaping the Form and Content of Utopian Visions” Brian Garvey traces technology through Utopian and Dystopian literature.

Even as far back as Plato’s Republic Utopian books have taught readers that technology is good because it allows society to advance (Garvey 2).



Dystopian authors began to feel “ apprehension about population growth, urbanization, and all the other anxieties which accompany times of rapid social and technological change became apparent in the emergence of tales of catastrophe” and they associated these apprehensions with new technological advances. YA Dystopian authors continue to contradict the Utopian view of technology (Garvey 4). For example, *The Hunger Games*, by Suzanne Collins, has a government that has been so corrupted by technology they have resorted to recreating arena fights with primitive District children to create entertainment. As mentioned earlier, YA Dystopian literature has collected a lot of criticism. This genre shares a lot of controversies with YA literature as a whole, including evil adults, alcohol and drug use and sexual relationships (Howell 21).

However, the main controversy within YA Dystopian literature is violence. “ The violence within these novels is stunning” and it is steadily growing (Howell 18). The best example of this would be Collins’ *The Hunger Games*. Just comparing it to *The Giver*, where violence is shown only through memories, there is an astonishing increase in violence. The Realistic Dystopia versus the Science Fiction Dystopia controversy is most important when connected to violence in Dystopian books.

Realistic Dystopias are criticized more often because they hit closer to home. Both types of Dystopias push against social norms and introduce teenagers to controversial topics, but it is harder to ignore the lessons behind the futuristic world of Westerfeld’s *The Uglies* versus the world that Blackman creates in *Naughts and Crosses* that follows the rules of the real world.

Violence is used, in both Realistic and Science Fiction Dystopias, like all other

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teaching tools. Teenagers should already be aware that violence exists in the world, even if they were sheltered from it as children; they are not fazed by violence. The Hunger Games reinforces the fact that violence exists, it does not justify violence.

Violence in YA Dystopian literature is used to show teenagers that harming others is wrong. YA Dystopian literature as a whole is highly varied, but whether adults choose to write about social divisions or environmental problems, two things never change: teenagers enjoy reading them and there are adult critics who have problems with them. All of the problems that critics have with YA Dystopian books come down to one belief: Dystopian books are too harsh for teenagers. Dystopian books are harsh, but YA Dystopian books are written specifically to introduce teenagers to the harsh realities of the world. Children cannot remain sheltered and ignorant forever.

Kay Sambell explains that these authors “ display a desire to ‘ tell it as it is’”, but that does not mean that the truth is thrown in their faces (251). It is a gentle teaching process that uses hope as a cushioning device. Adding hope to dystopian worlds might be adding a white lie, but it is just as necessary as the truth. YA Dystopian authors have to find the balance between truth and hope. Philip Reeve offers several suggestions for why teenagers are drawn to Dystopian books: they could “ draw a bleak satisfaction from imagining adult society reduced to smoking rubble” or maybe “ it’s just cool to mentally recast yourself as a rebel against some future tyranny”.

Both true to some degree, but his second suggestion is closer to the universal truth: they have “ become aware of the deep injustices in the wider

world, which dystopian fiction often reflects”. The mixture of truth and hope in Dystopian books, which can seem unsatisfying to adults, is what draws teenagers in. Emotions are key to YA Dystopian literature and hope is its most powerful emotion (Bethune). Robyn Howell explains this by quoting Reeve: “ The mood of the dystopian YA genre can be grim, but the general idea is the triumph over the direct circumstances” (25). It is just as important to understand the hope that a YA Dystopian author offers his readers, as it is to understand his warning. Even books that seem to end with tragedy always gives the readers some hope.

Naughts and Crosses, for example, ends with a death but readers are comforted that the remaining characters promise to continue fighting. YA Dystopian literature shares the goals of both YA literature and Dystopian literature. These books seek to show readers other adolescents’ coming of age journeys and warn them about real world problems. Teenagers do not just learn about the world, they learn about themselves. Today’s teenagers are tomorrow’s decision makers and while they are usually unconscious of the warning with a Dystopian book, but they do understand wanting to make a change in the world. It is important that they gain confidence in themselves and their beliefs.

Dystopian novels provide readers a launching platform for what will become their own coming of age journey. As they grow up they will begin to understand that Dystopian problems exist in the real world and they will be prepared to fight. Rebecca Solnit has documented several instances of revolutionary change that have occurred because of Dystopian books. She compares today’s Iraq War and the United States’ large population of poor  
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families to *The Hunger Games*. "...-[W]e're dooming the young," Solnit says but then she explains that when people read about Katniss' revolution, they were encouraged to lead their own rebellions.

YA Dystopias have an even stronger effect on adolescents. Even though they cannot act now, they are more eager to change the world. We need leaders who can make a difference. As Brian Bethune says, "It can be cruel and scary out there. Dystopian, even." As the real world becomes more like the world in YA Dystopian books, these books and the lessons they contain become more important.

The sooner young adults are prepared for reality, the sooner they can start to change the world. Annotated Bibliography Bethune, Brian. "Dystopia Now." *Maclean's*. ca. *Maclean's*, 9 Apr 2012.

Web. 20 Oct 2012. This article explains the recent popularity of YA Dystopian books, specifically Collins' *The Hunger Games*. According to Bethune, teenagers love Dystopias because of the intense emotions they contain. Bethune believes that the connecting theme and the main purpose of YA Dystopias are showing the next generation hope.

Authors pit children against impossible odds, but they always leave their readers with hope. Bethune is the professional book critic for the Canadian current news magazine *Maclean's*. Bethune's critique of Dystopian literature shows that the growth of young adult Dystopias isn't just happening in the United States. His argument that Dystopian literature is connected to both reality and the current trends are similar to my argument. I also use his

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statement that emotions are important in YA Dystopian books to explain why they are so popular and why hope is so important.

“ Dystopia.” Work Origin and History. Dictionary. com. Web.

20 Nov. 2012. Dictionary. com is an online database that provides definitions of words not only from their own database, but from other trusted dictionaries, encyclopedias, and websites. It was started in 1995 and is updated frequently.

I use the Dictionary. com Origin definition of Dystopia because it shows the word’s Greek roots. This allows me to explore Dystopian literature’s roots and its connection to Utopian and YA Dystopian literature. Fentin, Rachel. “ Disobedient Youth: Political Involvement and Genre Resistance in Contemporary Young Adult Dystopian Fiction.” BS thesis.

U of Michigan. Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 2012. 39-53. Web. 20 Oct 2012. In the third chapter of her paper, Fentin explains that dystopian books are cautionary tales and young adult books focus on the coming of age journey for children.

YA Dystopian authors use their books educate young readers about problems in the world, but they skew the truth by adding hopeful endings. Fentin explains some common problems with the governments portrayed in young adult dystopias, all leading to the disillusionment of the young protagonist and his rebellion. Young readers will benefit from the active examples set by dystopian protagonists. Fentin’s paper was accepted for a bachelor’s degree.

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Her argument is an example of current discussions about dystopian literature, including the modern controversies found in books.

I use Fentin's argument that Dystopian books are "cautionary tales" to explain that the purpose of YA Dystopian literature is to warn and teach teenagers. Garvey, Brian Thomas. "Literature of Utopia and Dystopia: Technological Influences Shaping the Form and Content of Utopian Visions." PhD Thesis. U of Bradford. Bradford: Bradford UP, 1985.

Web. 26 Nov. 2012. Garvey's essay focuses on the influence of technology in Utopian and Dystopian literature. He works through the different stages of technological change and explains the shift between Utopian authors who think of new technology as positive societal advance and negative Dystopian author thinking who think about the dangers of becoming too technology focused. I used Garvey's explanation about the shift from Utopian to Dystopian views on technology to explain the difference in the genres.

I use his emphasis on the importance of technology to explain how prominent this theme is in Dystopian literature. Gueguen, John A. "Reading More's "Utopia" as a Criticism of Plato." *Albion* 10 (1978): 43-54. Web. 26 Nov.

2012. In his essay, Guegen summarizes Plato's key points in his essay *Republic*. Then he explains how More wrote *Utopia* as a criticism on Plato's essay. More did not argue with everything Plato wrote, but his main concern was the lack of Christian values. Both of these authors created the tradition of Utopian literature.

Guegan's explanation of Plato's Republic and More's Utopia provide historical context for the origin of Utopian literature. I use this history to explain the differences between Utopian and Dystopian literature. This helps me to explain the beginning of both genres. Howell, Robyn E. "Young Adult (YA) Literature: Details and Trendsetting." MS thesis.

U of Central MO. Warrensburg: UP of Central MO, 2011. 8-28. Web. 20 Oct 2012. In her essay, Howell admits that the YA genre is always changing and so is hard to define.

She describes the major changes that have occurred over the years including the addition of many controversial issues, such as sexual relationships.

Dystopian books in particular also have a grimmer mood than other genres.

Howell insists that this is what gives the books life and allows young readers to connect with them. This paper was submitted and accepted for a master's degree. It offers insights into current arguments such as controversial issues and using Dystopian literature as teaching tools.

Specifically I use his discussion on violence in Dystopian literature to expand my own argument about the necessity of controversial topics.

I also use his argument that YA Dystopias may seem harsh but always contain hope to support my argument that Dystopias are beneficial to young readers. Reeve, Philip. "The Worst Is Yet to Come." *School Library Journal* 57. 8 (2011): n. pag.

Web. 20 Oct 2012. Reeve calls for a return of Utopian literature. He explains that teenagers' recent attraction to Dystopian literature is being able to watch how other teenagers complete their coming of age journeys. Young  
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adults are able to create strong bonds with young protagonists while realizing how grim the world can be.

They are also drawn to the idea that young people can start revolutions and change the world. Reeve believes that while it is important, Dystopias lack the hope that teenagers really need. This article was written for the School Library Journal, which is a magazine written for librarians. Reeve has written several YA books. I use Reeve's different correct and incorrect theories about why teenagers enjoy Dystopian stories to support my own argument that it is hope not violence that attracts them. Sambell, Kay.

“ Carnivalizing the Future: A New Approach to Theorizing Childhood and Adulthood in Science Fiction for Young Readers.” *Lion and Unicorn* 28. 2 (2004): 247-53. Web. 20 Oct 2012. Sambell explains in her article that Dystopian novels teach readers about how modern problems in society and humans could turn into major problems.

Authors of YA Dystopias have developed innocent protagonists that fight against the evil in their world. Eventually the young protagonists grow up and have to sacrifice their innocence. The debate over whether authors should show young readers the truth about the world or try to give them hope is an ongoing battle. The *Lion and the Unicorn* is a journal published by Johns Hopkins University for discussing children and young adult literature. Sambell is a prominent figure in the AFL, Assessment for Learning.

She has written several books about the education of children and young adults. One of her main arguments focuses on the author's struggle between telling the truth and giving teenagers hope. I agree with her argument and I <https://assignbuster.com/the-dystopian-trend-in-young-adult-literature/>



use it to support my theory that teaching hope is just as important as teaching truth. Solnit, Rebecca. “ American dystopia more reality than fiction.” CBS. com. CBS News, 1 May 2012. Web. 20 Oct 2012. Solnit’s article focuses on the various problems in the world and compares them to Dystopian books, specifically *The Hunger Games*. She points out problems that the United States and the rest of the world are currently faced with: wars fought by young people, debt and poor people, industrialized prisons and environmental disasters.

All of this led to a series of revolutions that began in 2011, but it was only the beginning. Solnit was praised by *Utne Reader* magazine as one of the “ 25 Visionaries Who are Changing Your World.” She has written many books devoted to taking history and making it applicable in today’s world. Solnit’s examples of current events that have been inspired by YA Dystopian books support my argument that they can lead people to make changes in the real world. Trites, Roberta Seelinger.

*Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*. Iowa City: Iowa UP, 2000. Print. In her book, Trites explains that YA literature was created in the post-modern era, when authors were beginning to explore the relationship between the government and individuals. She believes that the main purpose of YA literature is to show the different power struggles between adolescents and the real world.

She explains several different power struggles, including the struggle between adolescents and parent figures. Trites has written several books about YA literature and won the 2002 Children’s Literature Association’s

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Book Award. I use her explanation about the beginning of YA literature to explain the recurrent theme of protagonists needing to learn to live in a wider world. I also take her example of the teenager versus parent power struggle and apply it to Dystopian literature. Her explanation of the three eras of literature helps me to place Dystopian, YA and YA Dystopian literature on a timeline. “ Utopia.

” Origin. Dictionary. com. Web. 20 Nov.

2012. Dictionary. com is an online database that provides definitions of words not only from their own database, but from other trusted dictionaries, encyclopedias, and websites. It was started in 1995 and is updated frequently. I use the Dictionary. com Origin definition of Utopia because it shows the word’s Greek roots.

This allows me to explore Utopian literature’s roots and its connection to Dystopian literature. “ Utopia.” Entry 2. Urban Dictionary. com. Web.

24 Nov. 2012. Urban Dictionary. com was started in 1999 as an attempt to collect the language of the common people, or slang. Because this website is constantly updated by various people it keeps up with modern language changes. I chose to include this definition of Utopia in addition to the Dictionary. com definition because it focused on a modern view of Utopia. It also allowed me to explain why perfectionism is a major theme in Utopian and Dystopian literature.