

Promulgating the Dystopian Blueprint: Control, Language, and Espionage in Dystopian Societies

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ABSTRACT

Through the changes from the utopian to the dystopian genre, themes in their respective media have changed drastically – yet have kept their original base. This base sits at the foundation of fear and caution. Authors write stories for a reason and choose the themes of their stories to express themselves. This thematic analysis will analyze the themes found in three dystopian novels: *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *The Knife of Never Letting Go* through the themes of control, language, and espionage. The aim of this research is to fully grasp and attempt to investigate and respond to the overarching research question, “How does dystopian literature reflect upon and aim to critique the current fears and anxieties individuals have of society?” Additionally, the sub-research questions: “In what way do events such as uprisings, wars, and other current events influence writers to release dystopian novels?”, “How has dystopian literature changed over time and what factors contributed to its change?”, and “How has the openness and variety of the dystopian genre appealed to young adults around the world?”, will be answered through a series of source research and interviews of high school teachers and students. This thematic analysis takes you through the analyzation of those three dystopian novels – set in different times – and through the methodology for the research of the sub-questions.

Introduction

When an individual thinks of the word “utopia”, blissfulness and serenity immediately comes to mind. A *utopia* can be classified as an ambience where supposedly every element is considered quintessential. Conventional paradigms of utopic societies include but are not limited to the Garden of Eden (noted in the Old Testament), the Capital (in *The Hunger Game* series), as well as Themyscira (a “Paradise Island” mentioned in the movie *Wonder Woman*). The exemplars listed all display a harmonious blend between social, economic, environmental, and political factors while aiming to foster a society where individuals can co-exist with one another without resulting in conflict. However, what happens if there is a disruption in the equilibrium in these seemingly perfect societies? How does the order of power change and what conflicts will arise? When a society has deeper, underlying issues but is masked by its supposed “perfect” image, it is defined as a *dystopia*. Ultimately, the dystopian genre is incredibly multifaceted and there is very little time for us to analyze every aspect of it. Therefore, throughout this research paper, we aim to explore the ways that authors are influenced to write the dystopian novels they write and what impact it has on younger generations. In addition, various methodologies will be used throughout this process such as semi-structured interviews and a thematic analysis.

Literature Review

The dystopian genre has only increased in demand within the last decades with the onset of notable works such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *The Knife of Never Letting Go*. The novels listed beforehand are the

chosen works that we decided to delve further into and find underlying themes and will also be the ones that are discussed in this paper. These books were chosen upon specific analyzation of the events occurring throughout the world in the respective time periods they were written in as well as the social and political statuses of the authors. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was written in the time periods of 1946 to 1949, which was just off the brink of the end of the second world war. *The Handmaid's Tale* takes on a more feminine viewpoint of dystopian literature and was published 1985, a period of progression for women's rights but still one where sexism was incredibly common. Lastly, the *Knife of Never Letting Go* was published in 2008 and centered around the concept of a world that is impossible to escape information overload – an experience that is quite similar to what teenager's experience with the development of phones, laptops, and tablets. This portion of the paper will conduct thorough examinations of each respective novel and the themes that they have in common with one another – being control, language, and espionage.

Dystopian Novel #1 Nineteen Eighty-Four

Nineteen Eighty-Four is a dystopian novel written by George Orwell and published in 1949. This dystopian novel centers around the main protagonist, Winston Smith, and his journey of rebellion against the ruling party, the Party, founded on the basis of English socialism (Ingsoc). The Party is a totalitarian regime that restricts the right of speech, freedom, self-expression, and privacy from its citizens.

Control in Nineteen Eighty-Four

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, there are a few methods the Party uses to control their citizens. These methods include the following: Class System, erasure of the past, and the Thought Police.

Class System: Just like in many other dystopian worlds, the Party has set up a social and political hierarchy for its citizens that includes the proletariats (proles), the Outer Party, the Inner Party, and Big Brother. The proles take up most of the population and are the lower, working class of Oceania. However, the proles also enjoy the most freedom of everyone else as they are the least surveilled rank and enjoy distractions from the government such as TV entertainment, pornography, and sexual liberty. A slogan that the Party favors using is, "War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength." The proles are not aware of the Party's oppression and thus are not a threat to the Party. Ignorance of the proles essentially gives the Party strength because the proles do not threaten them. However, letting them have certain freedoms keeps the proles from becoming conscious of the Parties' oppression in their way.

The Outer Party are government workers that are set to work in the four different ministries of the Party. Outer Party members are one of the most surveilled and controlled rank of the Party. They are not allowed as many freedoms – no pornography, no sexual liberty, no rebelling, no questioning of the Party – as the Proles. The Inner Party is the smallest group of people (~2%) that work on the internal affairs of the Party and are the ruling class. They are at the head of the Ministries and the people responsible for the arrangement of Winston's surveillance that occurs throughout the novel. The Inner Party members, much like the Outer Party members, are under constant control and surveillance. They have a few freedoms that the Outer Party members do not have.

Big Brother is the head and representing figure of the Party. Nobody has ever seen him in person, but his face is plastered on posters and messages to the people. Big Brother is seen as an almost omnipotent being who will always been present and will always be. Establishing a class system is a clear tactic of control from the Party. The proles, being the poorest, uneducated, and biggest population of Oceania serve as a relief for the Party. Keeping the largest population ignorant from the tactics of the Party ensures that they will remain unaware and keep out of trouble with the Party. However, with the Outer and Inner Parties, it is more complex to contain them as they are the ~15% that are conscious of oppression and in most cases, operate them. Nevertheless, the Party has its ways to overcome this. The Outer and Inner Parties are constantly surveilled with cameras, microphones, and telescreens in their homes. By dividing its population, the Party remains in control of everyone and themselves. There are instances where it is evident that the working class and ruling class are able to have the same products and food yet, the proles are given much less

by the Inner Party. By limiting resources for the people, the Party instills fear and insecurity in them, leading them to resort to a figure head – Big Brother – for security.

Erasure of the Past: Erasure of the past is one of the most prominent methods of control from the Party, “Everything faded in to mist. The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became the truth” (Orwell, 1949, p. 66). As previously mentioned, there are ministries that the Party has established for Outer Party members, such as Winston. These ministries include: Ministry of Peace, Ministry of Love, Ministry of Truth, and Ministry of Plenty. These ministries handle and cover issues on and declare war, practice hatred and torture rebellions, rewrite and alter the past and history, and handle food and product rations to the population, respectively. The Ministry of Truth is where Winston works and where his rebellion against the Party most likely stems from*. The Ministry of Truth is the one and only that controls the past and present of Oceania; they alter and destroy the past, then forget it. A more subtle tactic the Party demands is to refer to any alteration as “rectify”, “The messages he had received referred to articles [...] which for one reason or another it was thought necessary to alter, or, as the official phrase had it, to rectify” (Orwell, 1949, p. 34). Rectify has a more positive connotation to it than alter would in the case of literally rewriting history, engraving a more favorable undertone to members.

An instance of this happening was with a chocolate ration decided by the Ministry of Plenty. The Ministry of Plenty had claimed that the chocolate ration would not be reduced at all in the year 1984. However, the next day, Winston received an assignment to revise the original notice to a probable reduction in chocolate:

Actually, as Winston was aware, the chocolate ration was to be reduced from thirty grams to twenty at the end of the present week. All that was needed was to substitute for the original promise a warning that it would probably be necessary to reduce the ration at some time in April. (Orwell, 1949, p. 34)

The past and the nation’s history is important to people because it allows society to reflect on times they have done well and done bad. The Party is aware that the past is a door for citizens to escape through and thus, they restrict the citizens’ ability to access it. This ensures that citizens are not informed of anything or anytime that was or is better than the Party and therefore have a motive to rebel. The citizens have no other choice but to believe the Party and keep believing in them, because they have no way to challenge their claims; the Party is always right:

In this way every prediction made by the Party could be shown by documentary evidence to have been correct [...] In no case would it have been possible, once the deed was done, to prove that any falsification had taken place. (Orwell, 1949, p. 35)

The citizens are then left with their own memories and recollections. However, the Party has another system to prevent citizens from recalling memories and events from the past, the Thought Police.

The Thought Police: Similar to how real society has law enforcement, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has their own version of a government agency to compel rules and laws. The Thought Police are the secret police of the Party that capture and torture anybody who commits Thoughtcrime. It is the biggest crime that a citizen can commit and may be punishable by death. They were specifically established for this reason as they also have public law enforcement, the Patrols.

Thoughtcrime depicts a person governing thoughts that contradict the beliefs and ideals of Ingsoc. Although the Party cannot read peoples’ minds’, they are able to detect when someone is committing Thoughtcrime through their actions, manners, and speech that implies Thoughtcrime. Alongside utilizing their physical attributes to determine Thoughtcrime and Facecrime, the Party established Telescreens in the homes of citizens. Telescreens are TV’s that the Party and the Thought Police use to spy on its citizens, especially the Outer and Inner Party members. Citizens of Oceania are aware of Thoughtcrime, the Thought Police, and the constant surveillance. This instills a sense of fear in the population, giving the Party a state of power and control. Through their consciousness of surveillance, citizens are conditioned to act favorably towards the Party at all times, demanding themselves to believe in what they outwardly express.

Language in Nineteen Eighty-Four

Another of the Party's plays that we are first introduced to in the novel are Oldspeak and Newspeak. Language is one of the most powerful forms of expression that an individual can utilize to communicate with others, and thus the Party has tried to minimize the amount of communication citizens are allowed to hold. Oldspeak is the original English from the time with ordinary grammar and vocabulary. Newspeak is the alteration of Oldspeak with its goal being the less words, the better. Grammatical rules are altered such as, "un-" as a prefix signifying a roots' negative or antonym such as: warm (Oldspeak) → uncold (Newspeak). This is done for all words, whereas in Oldspeak, "un-" is utilized for a few words. Although not everyone speaks like this yet, there are many editions of Newspeak dictionaries that are used for publications of the *Times*, in which Winston utilizes in his publishing's. It is said by another character, Syme – who was deemed an "unperson" and never discussed about again – that "Newspeak is the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year" (Orwell, 1949, p. 55). Newspeak's vocabulary gets smaller every year due to its neologism vocabulary. Thoughtcrime – which has been mentioned multiple times – is actually Oldspeak, Traditional English. Its Newspeak version is Crimethink. The purpose of this type of linguistics amongst citizens is to literally reduce and diminish the amount of thought one has to go through (Orwell, 1949, 268).

Not only is the Party using Newspeak as a way to restrain citizens from expressing themselves, but they also use it to compel their ideals and notions onto the people. Doublethink is another Newspeak word that comprises of an individual simultaneously holding two contradictory beliefs and believing both are true. O'Brien, a member of the Inner Party, interrogated Winston, forcing him to believe that if the Party says two plus two equals five, then it must be true. By incorporating doublethink, the Party can use what is already true and distort that truth to oblige citizens to believe in their ideology: War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, and Ignorance is Strength. In order for citizens to have a chance of physical and moral survival, they have to genuinely believe in the Party.

Espionage in Nineteen Eighty-Four

Finally, as the Party evolves with their controlling approaches to obtain full reign over the people of Oceania, they are also committing this oppression through their extensive surveillance. The most obvious surveillance that the Party commits to are Telescreens, microphones, and cameras. As stated previously, Telescreens are used by the Party and the Thought Police to surveil citizens and keep them from committing Thoughtcrime. Apart from Thoughtcrime, Winston had also committed adultery – which is also a crime in Ingsoc – with a woman who also worked at the Ministry of Truth, Julia. When they had met in person outside of work, they knew that they were at risk of being caught because of all of the hidden cameras and microphones on the streets, "There were no telescreens, of course, but there was always the danger of concealed microphones by which your voice might be picked up and recognized [...]" (Orwell, 1949, p. 104). Although this is a clear violation of privacy, the Party does not care for the rights of citizens as demonstrated through their other approaches. Making this known sends a message of control to the people of Oceania in order to obey.

Through Winston's internal dilemma of rebellion against the Party, he starts out his rebellion by writing in his diary about the everyday tactics that the Party has set up. He questions them, hates them, and expresses them all in his journal. However, with his limited Outer Party knowledge, he is conscious of the fact that someone could be monitoring him through his Telescreen. The Party is not always watching (per Winston), although there is a possibility that anyone may be accused of Thoughtcrime and any other crime by the Party.

Dystopian Novel #2: The Handmaid's Tale

The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian novel that focuses on the perspective of a handmaid named Offred. Offred as well as many other individuals live in a region called Gilead, which was formed in response to "terrorist" attacks and political crisis that led to an incredibly overbearing and religious government. This region is built around one single goal: revive the dramatically decreasing birth rates by increasing sexual reproduction. The government takes control of the

few remaining fertile women and subjects them through horrendous brutalities that violate their bodies. Women are snatched of basic rights such as owning property, reading, wearing clothes of personal preference, voting, and many other activities involving free will. Instead, they are forced to undergo the mental and physical strains of intercourse, pregnancy, labor, birth, and post-partum recovery. All the meanwhile, handmaids serve under the authority of a Commander and his Wife and are required to be incredibly meticulous about their choice of wording for fear of others turning them in as disloyal regime members. This portion of the paper will discuss how the three prevalent themes in dystopic societies – control, language, and espionage – are implemented in the words, actions, and thoughts of the characters in this particular novel.

Control in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Political Hierarchy

Just like other dystopian novels, there is a transparent hierarchy where individuals are ranked in terms of importance and thus determines how well they are treated. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the individuals highest in ranking are Commanders and Wives. On the other side of the spectrum, those lowest in ranking are classified as unwomen and gender traitors. The Republic of Gilead promotes strict heterosexual behavior and does not tolerate any sort of same-sex activity. When an individual disobeys that firm regulation, they are put to death and declared as a gender traitor. The authorities of Gilead also do not believe in infertile men, only infertile women. Thus, the blame is often put on the handmaids when they are not able to bear a child and are declared as unwomen when they do not have functioning ovaries. In the middle of the political hierarchy, you have your Aunts and Marthas, with handmaids just below them. Aunts are utilized as educators or mentors to handmaids by guiding them through the pregnancy and birthing processes. Often times, they are infamous for their harsh and emotionally abusive learning tactics. The Aunts are one of the most emblematic figures of control in this novel because of Offred's constant fear and flashbacks of her time at the Red Center. Furthermore, Marthas are a category just below Aunts and usually serve functional household duties such as cleaning, sweeping, and cooking. Not only does Gilead assign each citizen a particular social status, but they also have to coordinate with specially chosen clothing. For example, handmaids are always required to wear a thick, red cloak paired with a white bonnet. The color red symbolizes their fertility and the purpose that they serve for. The Wives of the Commanders on the other hand wear intricate and beautiful blue dresses to showcase their status to their husbands. If we're looking at underlying symbolisms, the color blue is opposite to red on the color wheel which thus represents the handmaids and the Wives uncomfortable emotions they have with one another. Coordinating specific colors to the individual's role in society ultimately enforces the control that the authorities have over the citizens.

The Wall

The Wall serves as both a physical and psychological conflict for citizens. In the Republic of Gilead, The Wall encircles the totality of the city and thus makes it incredibly difficult for others to pass through by making it necessary to go through extensive checkpoints. The Wall also has a grave psychological impact on citizens because it constantly showcases criminals that were hung to death. This serves as a constant reminder to citizens that they could face deadly punishments if they were to disobey the Republic in any means. Offred along with her walking companion Ofglen are constantly said to be walking past The Wall and thoroughly examining the faces of the executed criminals. With each week – or even in a matter of days – the old criminals will be removed and another set of prisoners will be hung. This instills a sense of panic for Offred especially because the majority of the individuals who are hung are males, and she is constantly checking whether any of the faces are that of her husband's. In addition, not only is she afraid of discovering her husband to be dead, but she is also simultaneously fearing for her own life to be one on The Wall. Throughout the novel, she develops a personal relationship with the Commander and does various things that goes against the ideologies promoted by Gilead. With each opportunity to rebel against the government, she is bombarded with thoughts concerning her safety and whether she will end up being one of the bodies on The Wall.

Particutions

Particutions is a phrase constructed by Margaret Atwood that combines the words “participation” and “execution.” As you could probably guess, this sort of killing requires the participation of handmaids who are forced to execute a criminal using no weapons, solely their hands. The criminals are usually labeled as rapists, despite the majority being political prisoners. Gilead strategically utilizes particutions as a means for handmaids to direct their anger in another medium instead of disobeying the governmental ideologies of Gilead. The government ultimately displays a façade in front of the handmaids by making them believe that they want the best for them by killing the individuals who are supposedly “harming” the handmaids. This creates an incredibly complicated relationship between the handmaid’s true feelings about the government, thus ensuring the domination of the Republic.

Language in The Handmaid’s Tale

In the novel, language is an incredibly controlling factor of Gilead, especially the *lack* of language. The Republic controls the words and various things that people say in order to further their ideologies, beliefs, and their authority over citizens. Handmaids are specifically referred to as “two-legged wombs” (Atwood, 1986, p. 163), making this an incredibly diminishing and patronizing phrase that solely identifies handmaids as their purpose in this society.

“Acceptable” Phrases

Throughout the novel, Atwood frequently takes us through the daily strolls of Offred and Ofglen. Although they are walking alone many of the times, there are constant thoughts of fear and distress running through Offred’s mind. Saying the wrong things or being caught by the Eyes (secret police) is a mental battle that Offred consistently goes through. In order to appear less suspicious, the Republic has specific phrases that are “acceptable” and reinstates the advocacy that the citizens have towards the government. A typical conversation between handmaids starts with the phrase “Blessed be the fruit,” and the accepted response towards it is “May the Lord open” (Atwood, 1986, p. 19). Many handmaids may take the risk by saying phrases outside of the typically used ones in order to see if their walking companions are truly pious or are masking their support for the Republic. This is an incredibly big risk for handmaids to take, especially since their walking companion could simply report them to the Eyes. The phrase that handmaids utilize to test whether or not someone is truly devout is the term “Mayday.” Mayday is an internationally recognized phrase utilized primarily in planes or ships. Its true meaning is to signal some sort of distress, which derives from the French word *m’aider*, or “help me.” The first utilization of this word that we see in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is when Ofglen attempts it on Offred by mentioning that it was a “...beautiful May Day.” Unfortunately, Offred was not aware of the key word and thought of it as nothing, before discovering later in the novel its true meaning.

Biblical Phrases

Throughout the continuation of the novel, religious and biblical scriptures are commonly mentioned throughout. Even before the beginning of the novel, Margaret Atwood highlights a quote from Aunt Lydia that states, “And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.” This quote is derived from Genesis 29:20-35, and is commonly vocalized by aunts to remind handmaids of their duties. Another biblical quote utilized in the novel (derived from the second half of Genesis 9:1) is, “Make me fruitful. Mortify my flesh, that I may be multiplied” (Atwood, 1986, p. 194). In addition, before the Sacred Ceremony (copulation between the handmaid and the commander), the entire household is required to gather in a particular room while the commander reads through a text in the bible. By utilizing this religious text, the Republic of Gilead are ultimately trying to justify their actions through God’s credibility. They greatly take biblical phrases out of context and apply it to the ideals of Gilead in order to discourage rebellion amongst its citizenry.

Espionage in The Handmaid's Tale

Another way that dystopian societies establish their authority over their citizens is through espionage – the practice of utilizing spies to obtain information.

The Eyes (Secret Police): The Eyes, are secret spies of the Gileadean regime. They silently pray upon individuals who were reported through other citizens as being “distrustful” to the regime. This distrust could have possibly been triggered by an incorrect usage of phrases or by simply owning a book. Even if an individual appears to be innocent, they will ultimately be put to death by either a “participation” or by hanging. This instills a constant environment of fear for the citizens of Gilead and they are continuously reminded that they are being watched, as the name of the “Eyes” implies. In the novel, there is also frequent symbolism of eyes mentioned by Offred. For example, Offred recalls a window “...draped with a red cloth embroidered with a large white-winged eye” (Atwood, 1986, p. 218). Even though a cloth that resembles an eye is most likely not watching or evaluating her, the fear is still present in Offred’s mind and what could potentially happen to her if she does one wrong thing. What is even more concerning however is that the Eyes in the Gileadean regime can vary from ordinary people on the street to prestigious governmental officials. This makes it much more difficult to talk to new individuals for fear that they can ultimately ruin your life by sentencing you to death.

Dystopian Novel #3: *The Knife of Never Letting Go*: The Knife of Never Letting Go is a dystopian novel by Patrick Ness that follows a young boy named Todd. Todd is almost 13, and knows nothing outside of his small town of Prentisstown. Prentisstown is a strange town made up of men because, according to the mayor, all the women died of a mysterious virus. In this world, men are heavily impacted by a phenomenon where their thoughts are projected into a jumble of words and images visible to all. They call this noise. Todd struggles to live in a world where men are conflicted with their noise, almost to the point of insanity. As the youngest boy in town, Todd enthusiastically awaits the day he will become a man, his thirteenth birthday.

Control in The Knife of Never Letting Go

Religious Control

In Prentisstown, religion is a tool constantly used to control and manipulate Todd and the other residents. This is mainly shown through the words and actions of Aaron, the town’s preacher. Aaron uses his role as the town’s religious leader to instill fear in the people of Prentisstown. By preaching about the inevitable “end of the world”, Aaron is able to coerce the towns people to agreeing to rules of Prentisstown and their violent actions. In the book, when Viola asks Todd about Aaron’s teachings, Todd describes his religious doctrine as “Hellfire. Damnyashun. Judgment” (Ness, 2008, p. 244). Constantly claiming that “God hear’s all”, Aaron uses the presence of an all-knowing being to scare Prentisstown men into following his holy rules. This is illustrated early in the novel when Aaron catches Todd using the un-holy word “Eff”.

Not only does Aaron berate Todd for his un-holy speech but he also punches him in the face. Being the town’s preacher gives Aaron substantially more power than just the use of fear inducing rhetoric. He also preaches that he is “God’s mouthpiece” and assumes authority of making sure people stay in line, allowing him to do immoral things like hurting children.

Boy vs. Man

One of the first things readers learn about Todd when starting the book is that he is almost a man. Most would assume that Todd is 17, almost 18, but in actuality he is only 12 years old. In Prentisstown, the awaited transition from boy to man happens at the age of 13. As the last boy in Prentisstown, Todd is unable to talk and socialize with anyone but his

parents because they are all men. The deeply ingrained separation between boy and man in Prentissstown is used to control Todd through both isolation and forced submission. The isolation is not merely physical but mental, as Todd constantly feels less-than the other men in his town. Even though Todd is only 30 days away from “being a man”, the adults around the same age as him, who used to play with him only months ago, belittle him and find joy in asserting authority. Since Todd is the youngest, and the last boy, he is utterly alone besides his trusty dog Manchee. Through isolation, the leaders of Prentissstown convince Todd that he must follow the guide of men, and that as a boy he is powerless. These ideals are used as a tool to control Todd as he is very impressionable, submissive, and unquestioning of the words of Prentissstown men. The men allude to a momentous experience as one transitions from boy to man. The anticipation for Todd’s thirteenth birthday, is a consistent feeling throughout the entire book. Despite knowing that his town is covered in dirty lies and half-truths, Todd still limits his resistance and actions as he is not yet a man. Overall, the highly unbalanced power dynamic between boy and man is used to control Todd’s actions, but more importantly his belief in himself.

Language in The Knife of Never Letting Go

Language is a major theme in *The Knife of Never Letting Go* as communication and the way characters convey their thoughts is a foundational aspect of the book. In *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, the noise serves as an additional form of communication. In a world where he believes that everyone is telling the truth, Todd must learn that everyone is capable of deceit, even through their noise. As Todd’s world expands and he learns new things, he must learn how to utilize language and communication to preserve his autonomy.

Forced Illiteracy

Like *Fahrenheit 451* and many other dystopian novels, books are banned in the fictional community of Prentissstown. Not only are books banned, but any type of non-religious schooling is banned as well. All kids born from the town’s first settlers, like Todd, have no idea how to read or write and only learn from hearing people around them.

Patrick Ness illustrates the profound impact of not learning to read and write by writing through the eyes and knowledge of Todd. Some examples of this are the use of “suspishun”, “first sign of civilizayshun”, and “reckernize” in the novel. Those words should be *suspicion*, *civilization*, and *recognize* but they are clearly misspelled to emphasize just how illiterate Todd is after growing up in Prentissstown. Banning the education of boys in Prentissstown severely limits Todd’s ability to effectively communicate with others and to process new information. All in all, Todd’s forced illiteracy controls his access to the truth. When Todd’s parents, Ben and Cillian, send him away from Prentissstown to another settlement, they give him his mother’s journal that supposedly “explains it all”. The journal explains why he had to leave Prentissstown, what happens when a boy becomes a man, and so much more. But how does Todd access this information, the truth, if he can’t read it? The answer is that he can’t. He is forced to travel to a scary new world clueless when the answers he needs are just out of his reach. The lack of language, books, and written pieces is a large reason why the Mayor of Prentissstown is able to control the narrative and the town’s history. Without any form of books and the ability to write, all information is passed orally and through noise. In this book, language is wielded as a powerful tool that is used again and again to prevent resistance and the learning of the truth.

Espionage in The Knife of Never Letting Go

Noise

In this society, all men have their thoughts on display through their noise. Noise is defined by the broadcast of one’s thoughts through a chaotic jumble of spoken words and images. The constant and all most uncontrollable nature of noise drives men crazy as many turn to either God or alcohol for relief. Mayor Prentissstown and his first in command, however, use the noise as a tool for espionage and control of Prentissstown citizens. Knowing that the mayor, sheriff,

and everyone in town can hear their innermost thoughts prevents people like Ben and Todd from exercising their free will. An example of when noise is used for espionage and surveillance in the book is when Mr. Prentiss Jr. hears the word “silence” in Todd’s noise and learns that Todd discovered something he shouldn’t have in the woods.

Mr. Prentiss Jr.’s voice and Noise both change again. “Bring him out, Cillian. You know why I’m here. Seems like a funny little world floated outta yer boy into town all innocentlike and we just want to see what it’s all about, that’s all.” (Ness, 2008, p. 44)

Moments like these make the residents of Prentisstown scared to do even the tiniest thing that goes against Aaron’s religious teachings or the rules of Prentisstown itself. The mayor utilizes this fear to ensure that the citizens of Prentisstown adhere to his rules as they know he will always find out. Additionally, the mayor of Prentisstown uses the noise to promote this narrative that men are pure and only communicate the truth, “fostering a poor opinion of women as they are untruthful. Readers find that trust issues between men and women are deeply ingrained in Todd, when he begins travelling with Viola. Through Viola, a girl he discovers early in the book, he learns the power of silence in a world where you are constantly being watched and listened to.

Methodology

For this research paper, three sub-questions were posed to assist in responding to the overarching research question. The first two sub-questions were created to provide background information; through these questions, we attempted to discover the ways certain events can influence authors to write dystopian novels and how dystopian literature has changed over time. These two questions were responded to by reviewing and analyzing a minimum of five sources for each question (total of ten). In addition, this review will consist of the analyzation of three dystopian novels. Each novel is strategically chosen based on the time period they were published in and the social and economic status of the world. The third sub-question analyzes how dystopian literature gravitates towards young adults and why adolescents are so drawn towards this specific genre. For the methodology of this question, we utilized a semi-structured interview consisting of two teachers and two students.

Utilizing the search engine *Google Scholar*, many sources were analyzed to see if they encapsulated the general themes that we were looking for in our first sub-question. These sources needed to primarily discuss the motives of the authors in writing their respective dystopian novels and the connections between the fictional world in comparison to the real world.

After examining the source carefully, a brief write-up was written of each paper which summarized the general overview and issues discussed.

Once each source had their respective summaries, a thematic review was conducted in order to discover what the sources had in common and what areas they differed. By doing so, we were able to accurately identify the reoccurring situations in which authors would further discuss in their dystopian novels, thus allowing us to adequately answer our first two sub-questions.

As mentioned previously, the third sub-question that we were aiming to explore further in this research project is how young adults have been impacted through young-adult literature (primarily dystopian novels) and what attracts them to this genre. The following list summarizes the general process that we followed in order to achieve our results:

To begin, this question was answered through an interview methodology, one that was more conversational than formal which would allow for the interviewees to feel at ease. Interviewees were strategically chosen to provide different points of view on their perceptions of dystopian literature. For example, this paper utilized the inputs of four different interviewees: two English & Language Arts teachers as well as two students attending Innovation Academy. Two of the interviewees were females and the other two were males. The gender of the interviewees was one of importance because the dystopian genre has very few accounts of female protagonists, therefore having commentary from female individuals would be useful in this topic of discussion.

After the strategic choosing of the interviewees, a set of questions was generated to gain the most amount of knowledge from the respondents in a limited amount of time. The questions that were utilized are listed below:

In your own words, how would you define dystopia?

What is your favorite dystopian novel and why?

What do you think are the most common themes discussed in dystopian novels and why do you think they are so prevalent in this genre?

What do you aim in teaching students by implementing dystopian units throughout the school curriculum?

What do you want them to learn?

What were your students' responses to the dystopian unit? Did they enjoy it or not?

In your experience of reading dystopian novels, has your perspective or awareness of certain issues changed and if so, is there a certain example that comes to mind?

The following questions were asked to the student respondents as well, with the exception of question four and five. In addition, each interview was recorded with a mobile device to ensure memory of the interviewee's responses.

Once the interviews were conducted, the recordings of the interviews were played again so we could transcribe each word thoroughly.

After each interview was transcribed, another analysis of the themes was conducted to examine the similarities that teenagers shared with dystopian literature.

Results

Background Question #1

How has dystopian literature changed over time and what factors contributed to its change?

The Birth of the Dystopia

The dystopian genre, as it is known, has no definite root; however, its beginnings emerged from the utopian genre. Over time, the utopian genre, which encompassed idyllic, paradise-like societies, evolved into a new branch of literature – dystopian. Plato's Republic is one of the very first recorded literature and dialogue – written in approximately 380 B.C., that encompasses what a utopia truly embodies. Plato focuses his ideas on supporting for being just through a political and ethical viewpoint (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022). Although this was not classified as a utopia during Plato's time, his work shows clear points of a utopian society. The Republic comprises of dialogue of Socrates, in which he proposes an "ideal state" as a means to address why all individuals should be just. The ideal state entails a class system of rulers, guardians, and producers. Plato argues that in order for the ideal state to maintain ideal, everyone must act upon their duties regarding their roles in the society and not try to take over anyone else's (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022). In addition to the Republic, there were also other utopian literary works that were published such as: Thomas More's Utopia, Sir Francis Bacon's New Atlantis, and H.G. Wells's A Modern Utopia (Kalafut, 2019). These writings range from 1516 to 1905. However, as the world started to experience more adversities and conflict, the utopian genre received modification from authors. Dystopias were born from the flaws of utopias – the shattering of utopian societies. They take the same framework from utopian humanities but incorporate their weakness and flaws into them. Trying to create a paradise for individuals is highly improbable given the nature of humans and communities.

War & Government

A myriad of the older dystopian novels such as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, published in 1949 and 1953, respectively, come from the uprising of wars and totalitarianism the authors were witnessing in real-time. Orwell derived his idea for *Nineteen Eighty-Four* from his personal experiences living through Nazi Germany, Stalin Russia, and the Cold War. He witnessed the degree of communism around him and thus, created

a piece of literature that encompassed similar ideology. In a letter written to the man who purchased the stage rights to his novel, Sidney Sheldon, Orwell explains that he “was trying chiefly to imagine what communism would be like if it were firmly rooted in the English speaking countries, and was no longer a mere extension of the Russian Foreign Office.” (Miltimore, 2022). Furthermore, Orwell was a part of the BBC, the British Broadcasting Corporation, from 1941-1943 (The Orwell Foundation, 2017). There, Orwell learned the insides and outs of journalism, propaganda, and the manipulation of words to audiences, that created his vision for the Ministry of Truth in Oceania and Newspeak as a language (Kalafut, 2019). Under these circumstances, Orwell composed an analogous society to that in which he was living in. Rather than the “cautionary tale” that most dystopian works publicize, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, was written on the basis of real-life experiences.

Similar to Orwell’s experiences, Bradbury also went on to publish *Fahrenheit 451* based on his life history. *Fahrenheit 451* tells the story of Guy Montag, a fireman, who burns books and the homes in which these books are stored – contrary to what firemen do in real-life. In spite of the fact that Bradbury had many inspirations for his oeuvre, such as his uncanny tales, admiration for science-fiction, and his story, *The Pedestrian*, the main theme of the novel was inspired by the 1933 Nazi book burnings in Berlin (Brians, 2016). Bradbury mentions, “Too many people were afraid of their shadows; there was a threat of book burning. Many of the books were being taken off the shelves at that time [...] But at the time I wanted to do some sort of story where I could comment on what would happen to a country if we let ourselves go too far in this direction, where all thinking stops [...]” (Galaxy Press, n.d.). Resembling Orwell’s inspiration for his novel, Bradbury acquired a drive for *Fahrenheit 451* through lived and observed experiences. However, in comparison to Orwell’s novel, Bradbury did write his as a cautionary tale, and the exaggeration of history.

As identified, these authors, and surely amongst many other early-dystopian authors, wrote their novels on the basis of their experiences with wars and uprisings. This resulted in early-1900’s to late-1900’s dystopian literature where the governments and ruling powers were hostile to privacy and freedom and favored surveillance and utmost control over citizens.

Teenager Appeal

As of the early 2000’s, dystopian novels took a turn from their heavy adult themes such as: totalitarian and political commentary; surveillance and privacy; and pornography, to a more young-adult (YA) perspective. This is seen with the popular *The Hunger Games*, *The Maze Runner*, and *Divergent* series amongst teens and young adults, all published from 2008 – 2011. *The Hunger Games* follows Katniss Everdeen, as she voluntarily takes the role to fight to the death with other 12–18-year-olds of varying districts around the country, while the rich and wealthy living in the Capitol, enjoy the viewings of them in battle. *The Maze Runner* tells the story of Thomas and the other boys inside of an enclosed field, trying to find their way out through a changing maze. Lastly, *Divergent* is set in a post-apocalyptic, dystopian version of Chicago in which it is divided into five different factions, narrated by 16-year-old Beatrice. Specific shifts such as technological advancements and self-expression and identity attracted the teen population.

Technological Advancements: The growth of technology from the late-1900’s to the mid-2000’s has been astronomical, resulting in weariness and caution in a dystopian sense, given its nature to exaggerate modern qualities. In these YA dystopian novels and series, technology is given a major role compared to older dystopian literature. In the journal article, *Dystopian Literature: Evolution of Dystopian Literature from We to The Hunger Games*, Phillip Stoner discusses techno-utopia – a society in which technology has exploded presented by Oskar Gruenwald, “The thrall of this is thus re-enforced by a culture that places high value on science and technology [...] Just ask kids what they want for a present: a doll, a train, or an iPhone?” (Stoner, 2017). What Oskar is essentially expressing is that with the prevalence of technology and younger kids being exposed to it, it is unsurprising that a fictional world that utilizes technology is extremely popular amongst them. Furthermore, the technology that is depicted in older dystopian novels, is consistent with the technology in our modern era. Thus, newer books with advancements in technology are far more appealing to the younger mind than older literature is.

Self-Expression and Identity: A classic teenager and YA experience that shapes who they are, is their journey of self-expression and identity. According to Erik Erikson's Stages of Development during adolescence, Identity vs. Confusion occur. This is characterized by the exploration of friends, careers, interests, and rebellion (Cherry, 2022). Knowing this, it is highly likely that teens gravitate towards characters that are exploring their own identities and individuality to explore and validate their own. Stoner also mentions Philip Reeve, a British author, who discusses the self-exploration of teens in YA dystopian literature.

Stuck in those awkward years between childhood and full adulthood [...] they can draw a bleak satisfaction from imagining adult society reduced to smoking rubble. They are also, perhaps, becoming aware of the deep injustices in the wider world, which dystopian fiction often reflects. (Stoner, 2017, pp. 19, 20)

It is almost cliché for YA dystopian protagonists to rebel against their government, society, and overall reject conformity, considering their developmental stage of adolescence. In addition, the prevalence of female protagonists breaking norms and stereotypes is received well by the general YA population, as seen with *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*. Female portrayal is much more anticipated in literature by young adults, given that young women tend to struggle more with their self-identity. *The Hunger Games* is considered a steppingstone for female representation in literature, as Katniss is portrayed a tough, resilient, and strong female character (Finnsson, 2016). She is depicted as performing just as, or even better, than her male counterparts, rejecting female stereotypes.

Background Question #2

In what way do events such as uprisings, wars, and other current events influence writers to release dystopian novels?

The Arab Spring

It is notable that the dystopian genre burgeoned at the start of the 20th century in the West. Contrastingly, in the other part of the world – the Middle East – the dystopian genre was stagnant until the late 20th century and did not rise until a century later. In Arabic literature, the concept behind a dystopia – social and political commentary – was executed through different literary genres such as: realism, symbolism, and surrealism. One of the first Arabic dystopias is called *Al-Sayyid min Haql al-Sabanakh* (1981), or, *The Man in the Spinach Field* (Bakker, 2018). This novel might be seen as a predecessor to the following Arabic dystopias as it parallels Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (Bakker, 2018). The Arabic dystopian genre saw its surge during the early 21st century.

During the early 21st century, the Middle East saw many wars and uprisings that influenced their humanities content – one event being the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring was a series of pro-democratic protests in the Middle East and North Africa, lasting from December of 2010 – December of 2012 (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). One of these novels based on the Arab Spring is *Otared* by Egyptian author, Mohammed Rabie. *Otared* is set in Cairo in 2025, in which members of the resistance kill and attack civilians in order to ignite rebellion amongst them after the Knights of Malta had taken over the country (Bakker, 2018). In this novel, Rabie depicts occurrences of killings of protestors, which parallels the killings of uprising in Egypt in 2011 and the massacre of protestors in Rabaa and Al-Nahda Square in 2013, which had marked the finale of the Arab Spring (Marusek, 2020). Rabie had told *New York Times* that his inspiration for the novel as a whole, was due to the successful protest demonstrations that prompted former Egyptian President, Hosni Mubarak to resign after 30 years of tyranny (Marusek, 2020). Another similar novel based on the totalitarianism of Mubarak's reign and the protestors against him, is Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue*. This novel centers around Yehya, who has been shot by the government and thus, waits in an endless queue to acquire proper paperwork to receive treatment. The novel's exploration of a totalitarian state is interconnected with that of Egypt's under Mubarak. Aziz wanted to create a non-fiction piece that echoed the Egyptians' experience and allowed for her to depict this in a world that exceeded Egypt's' boundaries (Marusek, 2020).

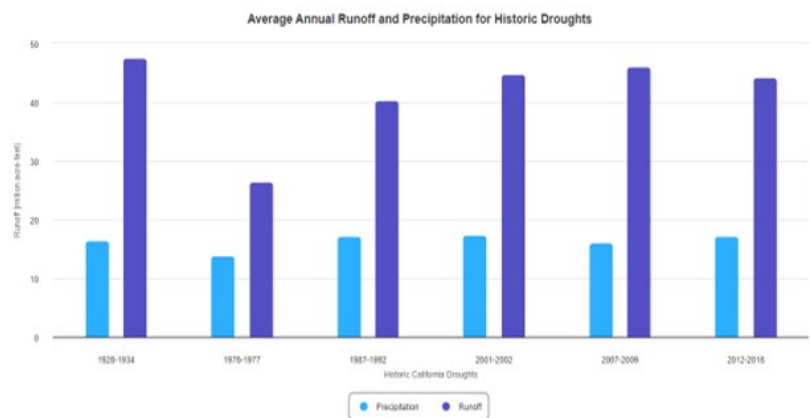
Environmental Concerns

By now, it is prevalent that dystopian literature and its respective themes arise from the current events that an author is subjected to. As we experience a rise in global temperatures, rising sea levels, and melting glaciers – the current generation is attracted to literature that depicts, foresees, and is in the aftermath of such themes. Generation Z (born 1996 – 2012) have some of the highest percentages of individuals who are concerned about the future of the planet and agree that there needs to be action taken towards the problem (Pew Research Center). With this being acknowledged, YA novels are more likely to portray environmental, post-apocalyptic themes in their dystopias. Such a trilogy is the Broken Earth trilogy, by N.K. Jemisin, that is set on a supercontinent called the Stillness in which natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions and earthquakes periodically occur, impacting the lives of its citizens. Its unrestrained themes of environmental distresses reflect the current anxieties people face regarding the environmental state of the Earth.

In addition, another dystopian novel that has risen in popularity is *Dry*. This novel is written by Neal and Jarred Shusterman and speculates a fictional world set in California that is burdened by a severe drought, causing the world's water supply to diminish drastically. The narrator takes us through the perspective of a young girl named Alyssa and her family who desperately try to survive each day with their limited supplies. *Dry* aims to explore the themes of environmental disaster, resilience, and survival of the fittest through not only the setting of the story but as well as the various conflicts that our protagonist faces. It ultimately does a wonderful job conveying these themes and warning the world to conserve natural resources and preserve the planet as best we can. In addition, this novel also showcases how events can heavily influence literature and how authors could educate the world through a more extreme version of the conflicts occurring.

According to an article published by the United States Geological Survey, "...California State Governor Jerry Brown declared a drought state of emergency" on January 17, 2014 ("California Drought"). To support this claim, the article provides the following graph that provides quantitative data regarding precipitation in California. Due to the all-time low of precipitation, political parties are consistently warning their citizens that they must continue to implement water conservation efforts. Four years after this predicament, the novel *Dry* was released and mirrored the very implications that could arise if citizens of California do not follow water regulations. This situation showcases how dystopian novels can be utilized to persuade citizens to continue doing good towards our environment.

September 11th



National traumas have the ability to shake an entire country, often resulting in chaos, confusion, and division amongst citizens. Societal rifts are stemmed from these national traumas due to individuals having differing opinions on how a government should handle a specific situation. This was the case with the infamous and devastating terrorist attack orchestrated by Osama bin Laden on September 11th, 2001. Before this event shook the world as we know it, the United States was deemed as a powerful and united nation, one that was characterized by a robust economy and governmental stability. However, with the onset of this destructive attack, the world saw the United States engulfed in a

predicament of vulnerability and national panic (Ames, 2013). Literature especially became increasingly influenced by this catastrophic event, seeking to replicate this situation with dystopian societies. Before the attack on 9/11, dystopian literature was primarily centered around the themes of governmental oppression and totalitarian regimes, as noted with the novels *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. The aftermath of this event on the other hand led authors to raise awareness about America's shared fear of terrorism through their literary works. Andie Berry, a graduate of Washington University in St. Louis, examines this further by stating in a senior thesis that "...many writers used imaginative, speculative narratives to address the turmoil of the events without repeating the exact gruesome nature of the attacks". As a result, national traumas constitute a majority of the dystopian genre and can "...manifest cultural anxieties that are agitated by crisis" (Berry, 2017).

Background Question #3

How has the openness and variety of the dystopian genre appealed to young adults around the world?

Global Relatability

Beyond the beautiful, crazy, and unique worlds, dystopian novels more often than not appeal to young adults because the experiences of the heroines and heroes are relatable to them. This general theme of teenage relatability among young adult dystopian novels has heavily contributed to this genre's global popularity. They feature characters who are young and underestimated just like them during their teenage years. For example, *Legend* by Marie Lu, features 15-year-old June Iparis, and *Shatter Me* by Tahereh Mafi, features 17-year-old Juliette Ferrars. These protagonists are majorly older teens who show their young readers that they too can create change before they become adults.

"Stuck in those awkward years between childhood and full adulthood, briding against the authority of parents and high school teachers, they can draw a bleak satisfaction from imagining adult society reduced to smoking rubble. They are also, perhaps, becoming aware of the deep injustices in the wider world, which dystopian fiction often reflects." (Reeve, 2011)

Teenage readers not only relate to dystopian novels through the eyes of similar characters, but also through the strong ties to real-world events. An example of this is dystopian literature released after the Arab Uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. The Arab Uprisings were protests and demonstrations that were against authoritarian rule and called for democratic change and governance. They brought hope and optimism to people during a terrible time of controlling and authoritarian dictatorships in Africa. Marusek, a professor of political science at the University of Hawai'i, describes how dystopian literature became the salvation of communities affected by harsh dictators. Dystopian novels released after the Arab Uprisings became a form of resistance. The books illustrated the dangerous and seemingly dystopic state of their world but told the tale of a hero fighting and resisting the oppression to bring hope to their people (Marusek, 2022). For teenagers too, dystopian novels have become an outlet for the oppression and wrongdoings they see in the world.

The catastrophe and fear orientated outlook that plagues Western Media contributes to the relatability of dystopian novels as well. Today, teens feel an innate sense of powerlessness as they see issues that began before them reach a dire state. Teens constantly feel like national and global issues are too huge of fix because of the very pessimistic tone and narrative of Western Media.

"Politicians and the media thrive on a culture of fear, and love to make our flesh creep by inflating remote threats like terrorism or swine flu to apocalyptic proportions. The environmental movement has gloomy sci-fi scenarios of its own to peddle and seems increasingly intolerant of any suggestion that progress is good, or that science, might provide us with ways to ease the world's ills." (Reeve, 2011)

The constant sense of doom and cultural pessimism, amplified by media rhetoric, has almost primed young adults for the world of dystopia. The way social media and fear-inducing news can so easily shift public perception has made it hard for teenagers to grow up in a world that is constantly facing "doom". Even events and concerns that don't directly affect them manage to reach them through social media, which never fails to amplify and worsen the look of

situations. Living in this day and age, where social media and news are magnifying people's concerns has psychologically impacted teenagers and their outlooks on life. This sense of powerlessness and anxiety about the future, plays a large role in just how relatable dystopian novels can be.

2010s YA Dystopian Boom

After the world-rocking release of *The Hunger Games* in 2008, dystopian novels have dominated bestseller lists because of their young adult readers. The publication of this trilogy ignited interest in the dystopian genre for millions of young adults and teenagers around the world. This led to a surge in the YA Dystopian genre as novels like *Divergent* by Veronica Roth, *The Maze Runner* by James Dashner, and *The Darkest Minds* by Alexandra Bracken followed. These novels featured totalitarian governments, control, and rebellion in what is now a standard three-book dystopian series. These series left a lasting impact on not only the dystopian genre, but the literary world as why. What was so special about the 2010s YA dystopian boom?

The popularity of the foundational dystopian books from the 2010s was not solely because of teenagers reading but also the culture they crafted with it. The publication of *The Hunger Games* created readers, but in the eyes of readers these series created fun and all-consuming fandoms. During this time period, not only did movie series come out to accompany the books which added to the growing popularity. "Books, films, and tv shows are always interacting with each other..." (LO et.al, 2020) The release of movie adaptations shortly following the books release, that the extreme excitement and buzz around certain series lasted for nearly a decade. The books and movies intertwined to create so much teenage interest that platforms for online literary discussion peeked as well. The main platform that gained popularity during this time is BookTube. Publishing assistant at Random House Children's Books, Eugenia Y. Lo, writes, "BookTube videos, mostly centered around Young Adult books, can range from book reviews, book hauls, book recommendations, book tags, and video blogs about book-related events" (LO et. al., 2020). The dystopian era of the 2010s open the door reading focused platforms like Booktube, Bookstagram and Goodreads to thrive as platforms for teens to interact and expose one another to new books. Without books like *Divergent*, BookTube couldn't have grown into the vast community it is today, and we most likely wouldn't have newer platforms like BookTok.

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