The Unexpected Popularity of Dystopian Literature:
From Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* to Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* Trilogy.

B.A. Essay

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Abstract
Dystopian literature has existed for over a hundred years, being as popular as any other moderately successful literary genre. Over the past few decades, however, it has become increasingly acclaimed, particularly after the turn of the century. There is no single factor that can properly explain the reason behind this popularity, although there are a number of likely ones which can paint a relatively clear picture of matters. The world that young adults of today are experiencing is different from that of their predecessors, the reason being a number of world events, from the aftermath of the Cold War, to fears of terrorist attacks, a rapid evolving of technology and beyond. All these factors, followed by a broader world view brought forth by the Internet, have contributed to a greater awareness among young people today of social issues, such as equal rights. Novels such as *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* have, at the same time, paved the way for a vastly increased demand for young adult fiction, right up to the global market crash of 2008 just before the release of *The Hunger Games*. This was another impactful world event that shifted the minds of young people across the western world, having them seeking comfort in dystopian fiction akin to *The Hunger Games*. At the same time, a growing emphasis on modern gender roles brought forth a change in dystopian fiction, notably with their characters. Today there are more female authors, who write stories with female protagonists that appeal to both sexes. The three different dystopian novels, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Hunger Games*, throw light upon this development and how this literary genre has evolved. They also lend themselves well to comparison as they echo one another and reflect the pressing social issues of their times.
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1. Introduction

Dystopian literature has, usually, been a relatively popular medium among people of all ages during the greatest part of the twentieth century. During the advent of the twenty-first century this began to change, however, with an increasing amount of dystopian fiction aimed at young adults, such as M.T. Anderson’s Feed from 2002, Julie Bertagna’s Exodus from 2002, Meg Rosoff’s How I Live Now from 2004, Scott Westerfield’s Uglies from 2005, Cory Doctorow’s Little Brother from 2008, and many more. Finally, author Suzanne Collins wrote three consecutive novels, known as the Hunger Games trilogy, the first of which was published in 2008. The immense popularity of these novels, and their film versions, has arguably inspired many offshoots of dystopian literature and films. There are various factors which might explain the reason behind this increased popularity, although there will never be a completely clear answer, as is the case with popularity in general. The most prominent reason, according to research, is a changed emphasis among young adults all around the western world. Due to a broader world view, brought forth by the advent of the increasingly accessible Internet, people are generally more aware of social issues of various sorts, most prominent of which are equal rights. Having followed the Harry Potter and Twilight series, The Hunger Games arrived in bookstores at the same time when the global market crash of 2008 occurred. After many years of people seemingly losing touch with reality and becoming greedier, a harsh reality emerged. This was when young adults became increasingly aware that they could have a slightly worse life than their parents, prompting them to connect more easily with the newly published Hunger Games and the, although more exaggerated, world of Panem. Another prominent reason is a more feminine approach in recent dystopian literature. Now there are more female authors, and strong female characters that may serve to make the genre more appealing to a broader audience than before. In order to explain properly the unexpected popularity of dystopian literature of this century, going through selected novels of the 20th century is vital, along with defining the proper terms.

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4 Craig, ibid.
2. Dystopian literature

The term “dystopia” was originally coined by the philosopher John Stuart Mill in 1868 as an antonym to the word “utopia” created by Sir Thomas Moore in 1516 in his book *Utopia*. While utopia describes an ideally perfect society, its opposite, dystopia, describes an imaginary place “in which everything is as bad as possible.” Dystopian writing has the unique quality of engaging its readers with pressing political matters, such as liberty and self-determination, environmental destruction and looming catastrophe, questions of identity, and the increasingly fragile boundaries between technology and the self. This is because of its capacity both to frighten and warn. Dystopian fiction describes non-existent societies intended to be read as “considerably worse” than the reader’s own. Yet dystopia is a tensely vexed term. Orthographically speaking, it seems as if it ought to be the reverse of a utopia, the non-existent society “considerably better” than the current world. But instead, the dystopia often functions as a rhetorical *reductio ad absurdum* of a utopian philosophy, extending a utopia to its most extreme ends in order to caution against the destructive politics and culture of the author’s present. It generally differs from the utopia in the sense that its prescription is negative, rather than positive: it does not tell us how to build a better world, but how to perhaps avoid continuing to mess up the one we have got.

Although more traditional dystopias, such as George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, were largely an “extrapolation from the present that involved a warning,” more recent examples, especially for young people, are expressly concerned with how to use this warning to create new possibilities for utopian hope within the space of the text. The dystopian worlds are bleak, not because they are meant to stand as mere cautionary tales, but because they are designed to display, in sharp relief, the possibility of utopian change even in the darkest of circumstances.

Dystopian literature often preoccupies itself with environmental issues, envisioning the world after its damage by environmental factors. There are other world changing events that often play a part in creating the dystopian world, such as plague, a third World War, asteroids, or even zombies. One result of these apocalyptic disasters is that they destroy civilizations, leaving small bands of people struggling to exist, turning them into dystopias.

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marked by secrecy, fear, and control. This is due to the fact that those in power use violence and repression to maintain what little social structure remains. Conformity is another issue often found within dystopian literature, such as 1993’s *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, or 2000’s *Gathering Blue* by the same author.9

2.1 The increasing demand for dystopia

Although interest in dystopian literature has always been relatively high, the demand for these novels has increased significantly from the turn of the century. Dystopian fiction has been written specifically for young adults since at least the 1970s. At the same time, however, as reading as a pastime had dwindled among young readers, the number of dystopian novels aimed for young adults has surged. Young adult, or YA fiction, is basically “a body of literature appropriate for individuals at a certain age of development.”10

From the 1960s there has been a great increase in dystopian fiction in general, which is mainly due to the effects of the Cold War. Throughout the world, there has been growing uneasiness over issues such as regular economic crises, anxiety about the future, war and terror, along with tensions between the traditional and the progressive .11

Many important studies underscore the fact that what makes dystopian fiction appealing to young readers stems from numerous factors. Firstly, this group of readers comes from a generation that is accustomed to the fast progress of technology and science. Secondly, dystopian fiction makes young adults aware of the potential consequences of this fast progress, resulting in advanced surveillance techniques and genetic manipulation, to name a few. Finally, all fiction intended for YA’s provides its readers with an opportunity to reflect upon themselves, their lives and aids them on their path to autonomy, authenticity and selfhood.12 What makes later YA dystopian literature different from older ones is a wealth of ideas on freedom in a world influenced by biopolitics. *The Hunger Games*, for example, evolves this concept by exploring hegemonic and natural freedoms.13

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9 Basu et al, 3.
10 Voigts and Boller, 411.
12 Gadowski, 153.
13 Gadowski, 158.
Chris Crowe and Roberta Seelinger Trites outline a tradition of gritty YA novels popular with younger readers, beginning with texts such as S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* from 1967.\textsuperscript{14} Due to its apparent darkness, contemporary dystopian fiction for YA may be read as part of this tradition, but this recent explosion of texts cannot be explained away as simply the natural progression of the YA genre. Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* from 1993 was a relatively popular dystopia for younger readers, but it was not until the 2000s that readers started to find a plethora of dystopias lining the bookshelves of the YA section, with titles like M.T. Anderson’s *Feed* from 2002, Julie Bertagna’s *Exodus* from 2002, Meg Rosoff’s *How I Live Now* from 2004, Scott Westerfield’s *Uglies* from 2005, Cory Doctorow’s *Little Brother* from 2008, Lauren Oliver’s *Delirium* from 2011, and many more. That readers “can’t seem to get enough of fiction that suggests the future may be worse than the present” raises the question as to why it holds such appeal.\textsuperscript{15} YA dystopias more often than not feature certain “awakenings” to the truth for the central character or characters of what has really been going on. Eventually they find out and rebel.\textsuperscript{16}

2.2 Why is dystopian literature so popular now?

Something quite unexpected happened from the end of the 20th century and well on to the beginning of the 21st, with the release of J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* novels. Children and young people of all ages around the world began reading the books, waiting anxiously for the next instalment in the series, despite the fact that other mediums such as television and video games were arguably more popular. This has left us with new generations of young readers who feel the need to satisfy their craving for more stories akin to *Harry Potter*, although not necessarily the same. Will Hutton, principal of Hertford College, Oxford, claims that *Harry Potter’s* success stems not from how well written they are, but rather something closer to the so-called “Da Vinci Code effect”. That is, the successful use of globalization as a means of gaining a vast number of excited readers. What worked for Rowling had been turned down by eight publishers prior to being finally accepted, followed by her novel gaining good reviews and her stating early on how many sequels were being planned.

\textsuperscript{14} Basu et al, 2.
\textsuperscript{15} Basu et al, 2.
\textsuperscript{16} Basu et al, 4.
According to Hutton, the social grapevine is what counts the most, empowered by positive reviews and the classic word of mouth effect.\(^{17}\)

Writer Alex Campbell theorizes, in an article in *The Guardian*, that technology could be the answer to why teenage dystopia, such as *The Hunger Games*, has become more popular now than ever before. He mentions social media, likening it to an otherworldly, futuristic phenomena which can control its users to an extent, “with non-stop exposure to the world’s problems coupled with a personal pressure to be seen fitting in”. As if it plays a satisfying role in appeasing the “darker areas of the human condition by what we read”\(^{18}\) He speculates that, since we tend to feel as if *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s Big Brother is in some way monitoring our lives on the Internet, what it is we “Like”, what we purchase and what we write, we might already be living a sort of dystopia in our modern lives. With that in mind, we might be further inclined to delve into these modern dystopian fantasies in which the heroes struggle through an exaggerated version of our own lives, spinning our own “subsequent fight to escape.”\(^{19}\) The common struggle seems, after all, to be ourselves still trying to fit into society’s norms. This leads to another point, being the question of whether or not the reader gets any answers in the end. For Campbell, so much is apparent. “They hit the mark, light the exit to escape that feeling of being controlled, destiny out of your hands stuff, in the big sense as well as small ways.”\(^{20}\) He adds that after reading dystopian literature aimed at YA, he feels encouraged to go on a fight, ending up slightly more liberated than before. However, upon asking a sixteen year old dystopia fan, by the name of Ellen, why she liked this type of literature so much, she claimed she often felt disheartened by how negatively they tend to view the future, even though she often finds them enjoyable. Campbell finally concludes that no matter what or how many the factors contribute to the recent success of dystopian literature, it seems that what matters the most is that they are “an exciting, page-turning read, like any good story should be.”\(^{21}\)


\(^{19}\) Campbell, ibid.

\(^{20}\) Campbell, ibid.

\(^{21}\) Campbell, ibid.
Earlier dystopian writing used to have more focus on single-minded stories of survival. This saw a rapid change in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack in New York City which brought a new focus on both personal and social change. Stories like The Hunger Games follow suit with the sort of dark, dystopian setting that young readers have come to expect. This might tie in with postmodern fears of the western world’s eventual fall, akin to the Roman Empire. However, readers are also drawn to a strong, relatable character that aims to restore the world to its former glory.22 YA dystopias more often than not present a certain urgency in a first-person narration, such as in The Hunger Games. This, mixed with the frequent YA fiction traits, such as bildungsroman plots and romance, with a “mind-set of fear and isolation” can interest those young people who followed the so-called 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The YA genre of books would usually serve educational rather than entertaining purposes. These type of stories evolved, however, especially after World War II, from moral stories to more entertaining ones. This so called “dystopian misuse of science” is an important ingredient for many YA novels. In other words, there evolved a supposed realization that increased emphasis on advanced technology would ultimately ruin societies. There is great educational value to be found in classic 20th century dystopian literature, such as Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four, which quickly became standard reading in schools. The same can be said of modern, YA dystopian literature, with the exception being that it is less crucial to the overall narrative. Laura Miller claims that in novels such as The Hunger Games, the focus is on the struggles of relatable teenage characters: “Dystopian fiction may be the only genre written for children that’s routinely less didactic than its adult counterpart.”23 Another factor in the success of YA dystopian literature is the portrayal of adults being indoctrinated, while teenagers are often the ones who see the world for what it truly is.24

24 Miller, ibid.
3. Comparing the different novels

Dystopian literature for teenagers became incredibly popular around the world in the 2000s, following the release of Suzanne Collin’s *The Hunger Games*, which broke all sorts of records. Even though parents might have felt concerned over its grim themes, including the drastic effects of global warming, gene splicing and children fighting among themselves for survival, it has nevertheless been welcomed as the successor of wizards and vampires, namely *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*. Its film release has paved the way for more dystopian fiction, primarily YA focused literature. Its popularity is, in itself, different from that of prior dystopian literature. Thus, comparing *The Hunger Games* with two dystopian fictions of the 20th century, namely *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, will give a clearer look at the reason behind this phenomenon.

3.1 Nineteen Eighty-Four

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* features protagonist Winston Smith, living in a dystopian London in the newly renamed nation of Oceania. Although he works for the ruling Party, he is constantly under its watch along with every other citizen, being told that the Party’s mascot, Big Brother, is watching them all. Although the party has total control of its citizens, there is nevertheless a danger of rebellion and thus precautionary action is being taken by means of forcing everyone to learn an invented language called Newspeak. This language lacks any words related to a political rebellion, which coincides with the Party’s stance on thoughtcrime, i.e. thinking rebellious thoughts. During the beginning of the story, Winston has become frustrated with the entire regime, especially since it had banned free thought, sex and anything that would essentially make people individuals. This prompts Winston to seek out and learn more about the Brotherhood, a secret group of rebels attempting to overthrow the Party. Over the course of the story, Winston falls in love with a girl named Julia and together they wish to rebel, believing a party member called O’Brien to be a part of the Brotherhood. They are, however, gravely mistaken and O’Brien has them taken to the Ministry of Love for interrogation and brainwashing. There, Winston manages to resist the Party’s brainwashing methods, until they decide to have him confront his fear of rats, finally breaking Winston and making him accept the Party and love Big Brother.

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When *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was written, it was an incredibly dark story influenced by its apocalyptic time, with most of Europe in ruin after two world wars and millions having been killed. It is also highly political, with clear allegories of communism, fascism and state control. The above mentioned factors were thus easily understood by its generation of readers. People generally tend to view *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a sort of “nightmare vision of the future.”

Meyers, however, believes it to be a “naturalistic” and “concrete” representation of both past and future. He also mentions that Orwell did not seem to be very imaginative and often sought materials elsewhere in order to gain inspiration for his works.

With that in mind, it is highly plausible to claim that Orwell did not envision *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a fantasy of any kind. Much rather, it is a “rearrangement” of materials from history and events close to his present, such as the two World Wars, the Great Depression and the Cold War, which culminate in his work. He has even stated that although it was set in a future period, its setting was far more realistic than fantastic, “deliberately intensifying the actuality of the present.”

Irving Howe claimed that the world presented within *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not totalitarianism as it is commonly known, but rather the portrayal of the unfortunately real but “unfamiliar political terrorism of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia” brought forth into London.

Among influences on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was the novel *Gulliver’s Travels*, bringing with it the Augustan impact. This mostly applies to Book III as it is a direct attack on totalitarianism and “an extraordinarily clear prevision of the spy-haunted “police-State”, with its endless heresy-hunts spy trials” as Orwell himself put it. Orwell shows a great understanding of totalitarianism which is most strongly influenced by Trotsky’s *The Revolution Betrayed* from 1937, which actively condemned the Stalin regime.

There are three distinct symbols found in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the most famous of which is a boot stamping on a human face. This can be traced back to *Gulliver’s Travels*, Book IV, in which the protagonist envisions the Houyhnhms battering the warriors’ faces. It can also be found in Jack London’s *The Iron Hotel*, when the protagonist, Ernest Everhard

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27 Meyers, 18.
28 Meyers, 144.
29 Quoted in Meyers, 145.
30 Quoted in Meyers, 145.
31 Meyers, 146.
believes that “the Iron Heel will walk upon our faces.””\[^{32}\] Finally, in *Coming Up For Air*, Bowling imagines himself smashing people’s faces with a spanner.\[^{33}\] The next, unforgettable, symbol is the rat. In *Gulliver’s Travels* Book II, Gulliver is attacked by rats. They also appear in Camus’ *The Plague* from 1947, in which rats are metaphors for disease. In Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London* a brothel in Paris smells of rats, and in his *Burmese Days*, a treacherous character believes himself to be reincarnated as a rat in the next life.\[^{34}\]

The main concept behind the idea of the Party, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which centers on the impossibility of the coexistence of freedom and happiness, evolves from Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* by way of Zamyatin’s *We*. In Dostoyevsky’s novel, the totalitarian Grand Inquisitor questions the ordinary man’s capacity for freedom and ironically “claims it to be a great merit for himself and his Church that at last they have vanquished freedom and have done so to make men happy.”\[^{35}\] Orwell stated, in his review of Zamyatin’s novel that: “The guiding principle of his State is that happiness and freedom are incompatible … The Single State has restored happiness by removing this freedom.”\[^{36}\] In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* itself, the Grand Inquisitor informs Winston that: “the choice for mankind lay between freedom and happiness, and for the great bulk of mankind, happiness was better.”\[^{37}\] The irony, of course, is that in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the people ultimately neither receive happiness nor freedom by choosing between the two.\[^{38}\]

One recurring theme in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is isolation, and some people, such as Bruno Bettelheim, believe the Gestapo and the Nazi concentration camps served as inspiration for this ghastly and powerful atmosphere in the novel.\[^{39}\] Like the real-life prisoners, Winston must face the problem of individual existence in the literal, not the philosophical sense. He does not attempt to define existence, but how to exist. The paradox of totalitarianism is that it intensifies personal solitude when it forces all the isolated figures into one overpowering system. A dominant theme is loneliness and exclusion.\[^{40}\]

\[^{32}\] Quoted in Meyers, 148.
\[^{33}\] Meyers, 148.
\[^{34}\] Meyers, 148.
\[^{35}\] Quoted in Meyers, 152.
\[^{36}\] Quoted in Meyers, 152.
\[^{38}\] Meyers, 152.
\[^{39}\] Meyers, 153.
\[^{40}\] Meyers, 153.
3.2 The Handmaid’s Tale

As previously stated, utopias are often regarded as the opposite of dystopias, being a perfect society of sorts. Some philosophers have contemplated feminist utopias, and not everyone agrees on the correct definition. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*, for instance, an all-female utopia is described as lacking the institutions of marriage, family and parenthood. Unsurprisingly, dystopias in literature all seem to provide the readers with worlds in which one sex, mostly females, is oppressed by the other. They describe the worst misogynistic societies of our combined history.41

It is of no surprise, then, that dystopian literature features the oppression of women in some way or another. Few such novels portray it as strongly as Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, published in 1985. It was written right in the middle of a feminist struggle, being very much based on gender and specifically the giving birth to and rearing of children. The premise features a distraught United States, transformed into the grim society known as the Republic of Gilead, originating from a movement which revolutionized the country in order to restore order. This society blames the country’s faults largely on women, and proceeds with removing their rights along with establishing a new militarized regime, closely following the teachings of the Old Testament of the Bible. In this new “republic”, nearly all women are banned from reading.

The story is told from the perspective of a woman named Offred. Due to pollution, many people are left infertile and Offred is one of a select few who are able to reproduce, and is thus used as a handmaid for reproductive purposes for upper class men who want children. Segments from Offred’s life before and during the beginning of the Gilead revolution are mixed into her narrative and the novel concludes with her being taken away by the so called “secret police”, otherwise known as “the Eyes”. The ending itself is open, in such a way that we do not fully know what happens to her, since there is a chance that the people taking her away might be part of a so called Mayday resistance. This is followed by an epilogue in which the reader learns that Offred’s story took place in “the Gilead Period”, which luckily did not last too long. The year is 2195 and professors discover Offred’s story, which had been recorded onto cassette tapes. It is hard to determine properly what sort of society had taken over, although it most certainly was an improvement of Gilead, with more rights for women and freedom of religion.

41 Little, 16.
According to author Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* has several “what-if” premises.\(^{42}\) To her, it would not be out of the question to use democracy as an excuse for abolishing democracy. In order to seize power in the United States, and to revolutionize it into a dystopian regime, no movement could directly resemble communism or socialism. The authority uses select passages from the *Old Testament* in order to justify its otherwise highly controversial actions. Atwood mentions that in dystopias, we find ruling classes which would do their best in order to achieve the “best and rarest of desirable goods and services.”\(^{43}\) In the case of this story, fertility has been threatened and thus women who are capable of producing offspring have become the desired goods of the upper class. This portrayal of fertile women as possessions and personal property undeniably reflects the position of women throughout the ages. Their repression has been justified on a number of grounds, motherhood certainly having been one of them.

According to Atwood, resistance to regimes such as these would be a given. In view of 21st century technologies in regards to spywork and social networks, these seem a bit too easy. When writing the novel, she made the following rule for herself: “I would not include anything that human beings had not already done in some other place or time, or for which the technology did not already exist.”\(^{44}\) Supposedly, she did not wish to be blamed for “dark, twisted inventions” or of “misrepresenting the human potential for deplorable behaviour.”\(^{45}\) All of the more negative aspects of her novel’s dystopia had many precedents, many of which were originally found within western cultures and Christian tradition. She notes, however, that she believes that the vast majority of Christians over the millennia would have been “abhorrent to the person after whom it is named.”\(^{46}\)

Specifically interesting is that Atwood does not believe the novel to be a strictly accurate representation of a “feminist dystopia”, since that would imply all men having greater rights than every woman. “But Gilead is the usual kind of dictatorship: shaped like a pyramid, with the powerful of both sexes at the apex, the men generally outranking the


\(^{43}\) Atwood, ibid.

\(^{44}\) Atwood, ibid.

\(^{45}\) Atwood, ibid.

\(^{46}\) Atwood, ibid.
women at the same level; then descending levels of power and status with men and women in each, all the way down to the bottom, where the unmarried men must serve in the ranks before being awarded an Econowife. The handmaids themselves are special, in regards to this pyramid, as they are highly regarded due to their fertility, but otherwise untouchable. Just as with any other slave, possessing a handmaid would prove to be a functional mark of high status.

Atwood cites three major influences on her novel, being her study of 17th and 18th century America, her fascination with dictatorships and how they function, and her reading of dystopian literature such as Huxley’s Brave New World, Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 and Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four. Orwell’s novel did not end with a boot stamping on people’s faces forever, or with a defeated Winston Smith feeling sudden love for Big Brother, but rather with an essay about the regime itself. Atwood allows Offred a possible, although far from confirmed, escape ending with an epilogue. When she is asked about whether her novel’s tale would be about to come true, she reminds herself that there are two different futures found in the story. If the bleaker one would come true, the second would quite possibly follow as well.

Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four is a prime example of the 20th century dystopian literature, being a wealthy source of inspiration for Atwood’s novel. The Hunger Games definitely draws some inspiration to Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, although the latter portrays a bleaker ending in which the world is rid of its tyrannical government, to be replaced with something questionable along with the protagonist left in an arguably worsened state. This ending, and narrative, has more to do with 20th century dystopian literature, possibly due to the fact that it serves more as warning guide rather than stories focusing on the growth of its protagonists as characters.

3.1 The Hunger Games trilogy

The Hunger Games is definitely not the first dystopian novel to feature a female protagonist, a notable example being the above mentioned The Handmaid’s Tale. The two stories portray different narratives, although they have various things in common. The first novel in The

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47 Atwood, ibid.
48 Atwood, ibid.
49 Atwood, ibid.
Hunger Games series was published in 2008 and the last one in 2010. This has also sparked over a dozen post-apocalyptic young adult novels which seem to have the focused theme of showing us a future in which our now unsustainable lifestyle brings us to ruin. Collins’ trilogy, which has received plenty of praise, is set much farther into the future than many dystopian novels, but still grapples with very similar questions and debates.  

The Hunger Games begins long after the devastating effects of climate change and war, decreasing the human population greatly. North America no longer exists and instead the much smaller nation of Panem has risen from its ashes, a country separated with twelve fenced-in districts that all work to sustain the increadibly wealthy and technologically advanced capital. Sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen lives in District 12, the poorest of them all. Her father died mining years ago, and now her family survives thanks to her mother’s knowledge of herbal medicine and Katniss’s own illegal hunting and gathering outside the district’s fence. The archetype of the girl survivalist is familiar. She is tough and resourceful, but kind and sentimental. We are put on notice that Katniss is different in the first chapter, when she describes a lynx who followed her around while she hunted. In many books, that lynx would be Katniss’s best friend. But not this one: “I finally had to kill the lynx because he scared off game. I almost regretted it because he wasn’t bad company. But I got a decent price for his pelt.”

Long ago in Panem, there was a District 13. The district revolted, and the Capital demolished it and killed all its inhabitants. To commemorate the event, and to remind the districts of its power, the Capital organizes the annual Hunger Games. First comes the reaping: one boy and one girl are chosen from each district to attend the games. Then the games themselves: a fight to the death among 24 teenage competitors in a sprawling environment controlled by sadistic game masters. The event is watched by the whole nation on live TV. This is likely due to the fact that Collins herself has stated that the idea of The Hunger Games popped into her mind while watching television, switching channels between a reality TV program and a newscast from the Iraq War. There can only be one winner, and he or she returns to his or her home district triumphant and rich. When the reaping comes to District 12, Katniss is not chosen but her little sister is. In a harrowing moment, Katniss

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sacrifices herself to the games instead. She is certain this is a death sentence, for no one from the underfinanced and under-nourished District 12 has won in decades. But as the games begin, Katniss’s intelligence and accumulated knowledge about edible plants and hunting become an advantage over the better fed, stronger kids with wealthy patrons who can send them medicine or weapons. As the contest progresses, Katniss develops a relationship with the boy from her district. But not even she seems to know whether her feelings are real or faked for the omnipresent cameras.

_The Hunger Games_ borrows concepts from a lot of different materials, and many point out a nearly identical premise in the Japanese novel, _Battle Royale_, which became a highly popular manga series. This makes for an exhilarating narrative and a future we can fear and believe in, but it also allows us to see the similarities between Katniss’s world and ours. American luxury, after all, depends on someone else’s poverty. Most people in Panem live at the mercy of the citizens of the Capital, although they are in fact the ones responsible for providing them with their lives of luxury.\(^{53}\)

_The Hunger Games_ novels have been widely celebrated for their positive portrayal of women. Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist in the whole trilogy, is a typical example of a strong female character who uses her tough mindedness and determination to challenge the gruesome dystopian authority present in her post-apocalyptic American world. Suzanne Collins, regularly explores female characters of all sorts in these dire situations, showing that they can do anything the male characters can do.\(^{54}\)

_The Hunger Games_ is dystopian literature that delivers through a central focus on love. A love triangle between Katniss, Peeta and Gale is a significant driving force through the story, serving as the fuel for the readers to become as captivated in the characters’ resolve to survive and finally overthrow the corrupt dystopian regime.\(^{55}\)

Katniss is initially presented as a character who is indifferent to love, viewing it as succumbing to an inner weakness. It is, however, apparent that love is an influential theme in the series and might be one of the more important factors when it comes to attracting such a large number of fans. Katniss is presented with two different love choices, resulting in a so-called “love triangle” between those three, with each person, Gale and Peeta, being different from the other. Gale represents the thirst for revolution and strength, while Peeta is the more

\(^{53}\) Green, ibid.


\(^{55}\) Broad, 118.
conservative family choice that Katniss grows to desire as she experiences war itself in the series.

People generally regard *The Hunger Games* to be a step forward for dystopian literature, or even literature for that matter, with its presentation of Katniss Everdeen as a strong female character. It might even be a step forward to allow such female characters moments of success, convincing the reader that she never wanted to be heroic in the first place. Yet, it is a small step if these moments of success happen only to female characters, especially if it mainly serves to uphold the status quo, as opposed to transforming it. During the end of the series, Katniss ends up marrying Peeta, living a quiet and safe family life, suggesting that her rebellious fights were only permissible as she was a girl. Writers tend to give children greater leeway with gender, allowing their characters to better fit into their gender stereotypes as they grow up. This is regarded by some as sad, since Katniss starts out as a smart, resourceful, and a superior marksman, yet as soon as she grows up she retreats to the quieter family life, removing herself from any political involvement. This suggests that Katniss is not necessarily as brilliant a feminist role model as many would initially presume. The same applies to many dystopian novels for young adults, as they more often than not hinge on gender stereotypes that usually have women playing the roles of mothers and wives. Downright rejecting the conventions of the romance plot that place women in these positions would be an ideal step to take for future dystopian novels.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Broad, 117-27.
4. The significance of these dystopian works

The three listed novels, *The Hunger Games*, *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are dystopian novels which draw inspiration from prior works. Notably, *The Handmaid’s Tale* draws heavy inspiration from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which comes as no surprise as it was written that year although published in 1985, while also focusing on the suppression of women in a dystopian society. The echoing effect continues with *The Hunger Games*, although it portrays the status of women in a slightly different manner. It generally references classic dystopian fiction, like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, primarily through its government, The Capitol.

In stories such as *The Hunger Games*, class and precariousness is forced into the foreground. The goal, as with so many dystopian stories, is to be rid of precariousness by belonging to the upper class. Being poor in those worlds is an incredibly harsh life, full of anxiety and despair. Precariousness itself is used as a means to control the poor and to keep them in their suppressed state, which also improves the situation of the upper class in the process.\(^{57}\)

4.1 Dystopian literature used as a framework for *The Hunger Games*

*The Hunger Games* is aimed at the young adult market, and has succeeded in being the successor to the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* series. In this way, the success of Suzanne Collins’ stories has breathed new life into dystopian literature, opening those types of stories to the eyes of a new generation of young people. This success has even led to various bookstores featuring a “Young Adult Dystopian” section.\(^{58}\)

The first *Hunger Games* novel was published at the time of the global 2008 market crash, with some believing it to be somehow connected with its success. It resonated a powerful feeling among young adults, coming to terms with the fact that their quality of life is to be worse than that of their parents. Unlike *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games* is intensely more brutal and political. It relies primarily on the prospect of young people murdering each other in order to survive.\(^{59}\)

The world of *Hunger Games* is a world that mirrors our own, being a not so distant future North-America split into twelve districts. The story itself might be a criticism of

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\(^{57}\) Fisher, 27.

\(^{58}\) Fisher, 27

\(^{59}\) Fisher, 27
capitalism, with the capital city being called Capitol. Some might, on the other hand, argue that the world’s situation is rather the result of capitalism, having led the people into a cyber feudal society. The Capitol extracts wealth through direct expropriation as opposed to the market. In fact, there is very little indication of there being any market, with no visible brands anywhere to be seen. Naturally, there is a form of a black market in the poorest districts, although they are illegal and no indication of legitimate commercial activity. The Hunger Games is, in part, a commentary on the empty allure of the media-leisure elite.

One might claim that the loss of utopian ideals might be related to the end of one’s childhood, triggering its opposite, dystopia. For example, utopias are far more common in children’s literature, while dystopias are more prominent in YA literature. For this reason, YA may relate more to dystopian fiction, especially when it features a relatable teenage protagonist, because the road from utopia to dystopia often parallels the road from innocence to maturity. Stories like The Hunger Games may trigger awareness of impending social threats, such as global warming, since they make young readers open their eyes to everyday conflicts in society. What separates YA dystopias from their adult counterparts is the fact that they do, regularly, offer more positive endings. For these reasons, The Hunger Games is a key representative of features that make YA dystopian literature popular. While its story offers the classic features found in its predecessors, it also incorporates updated themes such as gene splicing and biotechnology, while staying true to a focus on the building of identity, love, growing up etc.

4.2 A more feminine modern dystopian literature

It is natural to ask why dystopian literature has become more popular now than before, with some wondering whether it has anything to do with teenagers becoming more enveloped in “existential gloom” due to the global recession. Amanda Greg writes that before, dystopian literature, such as Nineteen Eighty-Four and Brave New World, used to be written primarily by men, as well as solely being a part of the science fiction genre. The protagonists were all male, and women took second place in narration, making these types of

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60 Fisher, 27
61 Voigts and Boller, 413
stories popular with boys, and not girls. The new type of dystopian literature, on the other hand, is predominantly written by women and appeals to teenage girls.62

Less sexualised than Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the new wave of dystopian fiction gives the perfect excuse for why, despite being desperately in love, the protagonists can’t have sex: as Meg Rosoff says, “in a survivalist love affair, you don’t have to worry about having a boyfriend or what clothes you’re wearing, because you’re saving the world.”63 Meg Rosoff, whose own 14-year-old daughter, Gloria, is “addicted” to the genre, says what teens respond to is “having big events happen in a world which is completely familiar. They see adulthood glimmering on the horizon and that’s as scary as the apocalypse.”64 Calling to mind a place in which millions have starved to death, as in *The Hunger Games*, being drowned by melting ice-caps, as in Julie Bertagna’s *Exodus*, being killed off as surplus because eternal youth has been discovered, in Gemma Malley’s *The Declaration*, or being dried up due to climate change as in Moira Young’s *Blood Red Road*, does tend to make fears about having spots and tests less terrifying.65

Yet it seems that a number of successful writers behind these types of stories never planned on writing in the genre. Moira Young, for instance, avoided reading any contemporary dystopian fiction when writing her bestseller, drawing inspiration from Nevil Shute’s 1950s classic, *On the Beach*. “I think it coincides with young people's anxieties about the future, in that it's about a heroic figure triumphing over the odds, but what drew me to write that kind of story was that it gave me a big canvas in which to explore love, betrayal and mistakes.”66

Malley sees that dystopias not only magnify what teens go through in terms of bullying and making decisions, but feed “their appetite for adrenaline. I’m very aware of my mortality, but a teenager doesn’t feel that”, she says.67 What seems to have piqued the interest of teenagers is not necessarily the thrilling action-heavy plot but rather the complex and flawed characters that drives it. Katniss in *The Hunger Games* has hunting skills and a great sense of protectiveness towards her little sister that make her the opposite to Stephenie Meyer’s passive vampire-lover Bella Swann.

Katniss pretends to be in love with fellow contestant Peeta to manipulate the millions

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62 Craig, ibid.
63 Quoted in Craig, ibid.
64 Quoted in Craig, ibid.
65 Craig, ibid.
66 Quoted in Craig, ibid.
67 Quoted in Craig, ibid.
watching them on TV. “Katniss is the kind of strong teenage heroine we were all waiting for,” one teen put it in Amanda Craig’s article on the teenage “craze” on dystopian literature. Gemma Malley, author of 2007’s The Declaration was quoted saying: “We had Hermione in Harry Potter and Lyra in His Dark Materials as children. If you've got a brain, vampires suck.” “Girls aren't waiting to be saved any more … They have strong moral compasses and, unlike male protagonists, insight into why they are as they are. If you go into schools now, you see teenage girls who are sparky and think for themselves. Dystopia enables them to have big adventures but it’s also about creating strong characters whom readers care about.”

Author Saci Lloyd claims that modern children have not been exposed to the horrors of war and with today’s comfort of living, they do not have to struggle as much as their parents had to. This, however, gives them no chance to “light a fire and blow things up as previous generations did. Dystopias look at our world from two degrees sideways. It’s ... slightly removed from today's reality, so you look at it with fresh eyes.”

Katniss is unique for her character traits exceed gender boundaries, making her an icon that can attract any reader. The novels are notable for complicating gender boundaries, which is an attribute to its unique success. The female characters are usually in charge and responsible for themselves. They also tend to portray masculine traits, such as being aggressive, physically strong, and warriors.

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68 Craig, ibid.
69 Quoted in Craig, ibid.
70 Quoted in Craig, ibid.
71 Voigts and Boller, 418.
5. Conclusion

Dystopia is, simply put, defined as the opposite of a utopian society in which everything is largely better than the normal world we know. Literature written about dystopian societies tends to serve as certain warning manuals for people, in order to prevent them from creating this sort of society. Utopian literature has been different in this regard.\(^{72}\) A very recurrent theme in many dystopian novels is a focus on the consequences of ignoring environmental issues, along with other factors like plagues, a third World War or more.\(^{73}\)

These types of stories have been well received and relatively popular throughout the 20th century. Their overall popularity has increased greatly during the past three decades. This is mainly due to an increase in dystopian literature aimed at young adults, which has grown exponentially since the 1970s.\(^{74}\) As previously stated, dystopian literature picks up themes from the real world and explores the consequences. The latter part of the 20th century dealt with the effects of the Cold War, with increasing issues related to an anxiety about the future. Younger readers were no exceptions when it came to such anxieties and would therefore be drawn to stories that explored these ideas.\(^{75}\) Studies have shown that there are, in fact, a lot of factors that make dystopian literature appealing to younger generations, such as recent generations growing up with a rapid technological and scientific progress and the novels’ capability of providing their readers with a chance to reflect upon themselves.\(^{76}\)

The demand for young adult dystopia increased from the 1970s, but near the end of the 20th century, J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* novels became incredibly popular for children and adults. This left the world with new generations of people who had a need for a similar type of literature.\(^{77}\) The turn of the century had more events in store, notably the 9/11 terrorist attack in New York City. This event brought forth an increased emphasis on post-modern fears of the fall of the western world, along with a demand for relatable characters that aim to save the world.\(^{78}\)

Comparing the three novels, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Hunger Games* reveals various themes that might have either transferred or evolved between

\(^{72}\) Basu, et al, 2.
\(^{73}\) Basu et al, 3.
\(^{74}\) Voigts and Boller, 411.
\(^{75}\) Gadowski, 152.
\(^{76}\) Gadowski, 153.
\(^{77}\) Hutton, ibid.
generations of dystopian novels, starting with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It was written during a particularly unique time in history, being influenced by the dark, apocalyptic time in Europe after it had been ruined by two world wars. Its clear allegories of communism, fascism and state control are factors that were easily understood by its generation of readers. It also carries a certain theme of isolation, originally inspired by the Gestapo and Nazi concentration camps, that seems to carry across most major dystopian literature.\(^{79}\)

Moving a few decades from Orwell’s story, Margaret Atwood wrote her own dystopian fiction called *The Handmaid’s Tale* that was actually published a year after Orwell’s story takes place. Atwood’s novel places emphasis on women and their general oppression in dystopian societies, while also drawing inspiration from prior dystopian literature. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* does not end with everyone getting stamped by boots, but rather an explanatory essay about the regime. Although the fate of Offred, the protagonist in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is ambiguous, it does not necessarily imply a bad ending, but the reader is told through an epilogue that the dystopian society would one day come to an end.\(^{80}\) One element that both novels have in common is that they seem to serve more as certain warning guides as opposed to stories that place emphasis on the growth of their characters, which is more prominent in later dystopian fiction aimed more at young readers.

*The Hunger Game’s* debut in 2008 gave an already increasingly popular young adult dystopian fiction a healthy boost, sparking a lot of new similar types of stories. What these stories seem to have in common is showing their readers the consequences of not taking care of the planet. Although the trilogy is set farther into the future than most others, it nevertheless includes all the classic debates and thoughts brought forth by dystopian literature in general.\(^{81}\) The story draws inspiration from various different sources, including 20th century dystopian literature, as well as its author watching television, switching between a reality TV program and news reports from the then-ongoing Iraq war.\(^{82}\) Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist, is generally viewed as a strong female character, and a role model for young adults. There are some who claim the opposite, as her story ends with Katniss being not very different from other women who play the gender stereotype of mothers and wives. The popularity of the trilogy does, however, suggest that readers respond positively to dystopian

\(^{79}\) Meyers, 153.
\(^{80}\) Atwood, “Haunted.”
\(^{81}\) Green, ibid.
\(^{82}\) Collins, “Contemporary Inspiration.”
stories that reject the conventions of the romance plot that is traditional in 20th century dystopian literature, among others.83

There are, therefore, numerous factors that weigh into the success factor of recent dystopian literature, notably The Hunger Games trilogy. The release date itself might have played a special role in that success, seeing as the first novel was published near the 2008 global market crash, making general ideas of capitalism and similar ideologies questionable. Its more brutal tone, compared to the Harry Potter and Twilight novels, seemed to resonate more with the general thought process of young readers.84

Other success factors might be the changed gender emphasis of dystopian literature in general. After Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale was released, readers were gradually beginning to expect a different approach to gender roles. The authors used to be primarily male, but now female authors are very successful in the genre, and their novels have great appeal for both sexes.85 Katniss is, for instance, a highly relatable character, showing both male and female traits that ultimately factor in the genre’s success.86

Thus, dystopian literature has in fact become surprisingly popular for a number of reasons, all of which tie into a changed and arguably evolved world. From having experienced world wars to fearing a next one, along with demanding stories that cross outdated boundaries, the dystopian literature aimed at young adults suits the demands of a new generation of people that has lived in an entirely different world from those who came before.

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83 Broad, 117-27.
84 Fisher, 27
85 Craig, ibid
86 Craig, ibid.
Bibliography


