

# Dystopia

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*This article is about the philosophical concept and literary form. For the Half-Life 2 mod, see Dystopia (computer game).*

A **dystopia** (alternatively, **cacotopia**<sup>[1]</sup>, **kakotopia** or **anti-utopia**) is a fictional society that is usually seen as the antithesis of a utopia.

A dystopia is usually characterized by an authoritarian or totalitarian form of government, or some other kind of oppressive social control.

The first use of the word has been credited to John Stuart Mill in 1868<sup>[2]</sup>, whose knowledge of Greek would suggest that he meant it as a place where things are bad, rather than simply the opposite of Utopia. The Greek prefix "dys" or "dis" signifies "ill", "bad" or "abnormal", whereas "ou" means "not" (Utopia means "nowhere", and is a pun on "Eutopia" meaning "happy place" - the prefix "eu" means "well"). So "dystopia" and "utopia" are not exact opposites in the sense that "dysphoria" and "euphoria" are opposites. The term "dystopia" itself is a combination of the Greek prefix "dys" and "topia" (from Greek, "topos" = "place"). "Dystopia," therefore, literally means "bad place."

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## Common traits of a dystopian society

The overwhelming majority of dystopias have some connection to our world, but often in an imagined future or an alternate history. Furthermore, the dystopia was brought about human action or inaction, whether stemming from human evil or merely stupidity. A far distant future where the heat death of the universe makes human life difficult is not dystopian, as human beings are not responsible for entropy.

Dystopian societies usually exhibit one or more of the traits on the following non-exhaustive list:

- A Utopian society with at least one fatal flaw.
- An apparently Utopian society, free of poverty, disease, conflict, and even unhappiness. Scratching the surface of the society, however, reveals exactly the opposite. The exact problem, the way the problem is suppressed, and the chronology of the problem form the central conflict of the story.
- Social stratification, where social class is strictly defined and enforced, and social mobility is non-existent (see caste system). See, for example, Brave New World's prenatally designated Alphas, Betas, Deltas, Gammas, and Epsilons.
- A nation-state ruled by an upper class with few, or no, democratic ideals. Note that non-democratic societies are commonplace in historical fiction, fantasies taking place in historical settings or fantasy worlds, and in science fiction, particularly in planetary romance and galactic empires, but few of these societies are regarded as dystopian. In these cases, the hierarchical structure is a result of economic and social forces implicit in the society. The lack of democracy becomes a dystopian feature when the government is clearly imposed by force on a citizenry capable of

self-government, particularly when the government hold some pretense of democratic ideals, as when children of the Party members in 1984 are admitted to the Party based on a test, while non-Party members' children simply vanish if it appears they would pass the test.

- State propaganda programs and educational systems that coerce most citizens into worshipping the state and its government, in an attempt to convince to believe that life under the regime is good and just, e.g. Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta*.
- Strict conformity among citizens and a general assumption that dissent and individuality are bad, as in *We*, where people are permitted to not live under public view for only an hour a day, and are not only referred to by numbers instead of names, but are neither "citizens" nor "people" but "numbers."
- A state figurehead that people worship fanatically through a vast personality cult, such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s Big Brother, *We*'s The Benefactor, or *Equilibrium*'s Father.
- Fear of, or disgust at, the world outside the state.
- A common view of traditional life, particularly organized religion, as primitive and nonsensical.
- Alternatively, complete domination by a state religion, e.g. Ingsoc in the Oceania of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the Sisterhood of Metacontrol in *FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions*, the Technopriests in *The Incal* or fundamentalist Christianity (with elements of reconstructionism) in *Escape from L.A.*.
- The "memory" of institutions overriding or taking precedence over human memory.
- A penal system that lacks due process laws and often employs psychological and/or physical torture, e.g. Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta*.
- A lack of the key essentials of life for many citizens, as with food shortages. If the cause of this is clear, it is not natural disaster or crop failure, but deliberately engineering.
- Constant surveillance by government or other agencies.
- Absence, or total co-option, of an educated middle class (such as teachers, journalists, and scientists) who might criticize the regime's leadership.
- Militarized police forces and private security forces.
- The banishment of the natural world from daily life, as when walks are regarded as dangerously antisocial in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*.
- Construction of fictional views of reality that the populace is coerced into believing.
- Corruption, impotence or other usurpation of democratic institutions.
- Fictional rivalries between groups that actually operate as a cartel.
- Insistence by the establishment that:
  - It provides the best of all possible worlds;
  - All problems are due to the action of its enemies and their dupes.
- An overall slow decay of all systems (political, economic, religion, infrastructure. . .), resulting from people being alienated from nature, the State, society, family, and themselves. Yesterday was better, tomorrow will be worse.

In dystopian societies, the economic system centers on stability and is structured so that the government or the economic system is immune to change or disruption. Usually, the industries operate at maximum efficiency and capacity, and then the excess products or currency is absorbed in some way by the state. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, people are put on rations, and excess production is absorbed in the "war" that is always occurring with either Eurasia or Eastasia. In *Brave New World*, excess production is sucked by extreme consumerism, encouraged by the government. In the One State depicted in *We*, there is no currency or exchange whatsoever, either inside or outside the walls of the society, but everything is provided to the people.

## Traits of dystopian fiction

Many films and literature featuring dystopian societies exhibit at least a few of the following traits:

- A selectively-told back story of a war, revolution, uprising, spike in overpopulation, natural disaster or some other climactic event which resulted in dramatic changes to society
- A standard of living among the lower and middle class that is generally poorer than in contemporary society. This is not always the case, however — in *Brave New World* and *Equilibrium*, people enjoy much higher material living standards in exchange for the loss of other qualities in their lives, such as independent thought and emotional depth.
- A protagonist who questions the society, often feeling intuitively that something is terribly wrong, such as V from

Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta*.

- This knowledge must play into the story's chief conflict being the protagonist with the society. When the society, however bad, is the background against which the protagonist's drama is played, or where the protagonist, though aware the society is bad, regards other individuals in the society as his opponents, the work is generally not dystopian fiction. The character must realize, however vaguely, that their problems are not individual but part of the social structure they are in, and attempt to engage that source of their difficulties.
- Unlike utopian fiction, which often features an outsider to have the world shown him, dystopias seldom feature an outsider as the protagonist. While such a character would more clearly understand the nature of the society, based on comparison with his own, the knowledge of the outside culture subverts the power of the dystopia. When such outsiders are major characters -- such as the Savage in *Brave New World*, their societies are not such as can assist them against the dystopia.
- Necessarily, if it is based on our world, a shift in emphasis of control, e.g. to corporations, autocratic cliques or bureaucracies.
- Because dystopian literature typically depicts events that take place in the future, it often features technology more advanced than that of contemporary society. Usually, the advanced technology is controlled exclusively by the group in power, while the oppressed population is limited to technology comparable to or more primitive than what we have today.
- For the reader to engage with it, dystopian fiction typically has one other trait: familiarity. It is not enough to show people living in a society that seems unpleasant. The society must have echoes of today, of the reader's own experience. If the reader can identify the patterns or trends that would lead to the dystopia, it becomes a more involving and effective experience. Authors can use a dystopia effectively to highlight their own concerns about societal trends. For example, Ayn Rand wrote *Anthem* as a warning against what she saw as the subordination of individual human beings to the state or "the We." Margaret Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* as a warning against the rise of religious fundamentalist totalitarianism in the United States and the hypocrisy of 1970s feminism actually aiding the cause of their worst enemies.
- Dystopian fiction is often (but not always) *unresolved*. That is, the narrative may deal with individuals in a dystopian society who are unsatisfied, and may rebel, but ultimately fail to change anything. Sometimes they themselves end up changed to conform to the society's norms. This narrative arc to a sense of hopelessness in such classic dystopian works as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It contrasts with much fiction of the future, in which a hero succeeds in resolving conflicts or otherwise changing things for the better.
- There is usually a group of people somewhere in the society who are not under the complete control of the state, and in whom the hero of the novel usually puts his or her hope, although he or she still fails to change anything. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell they are the "proles" (short for "proletariat"), in *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley they are the people on the reservation, and in *We* by Zamyatin they are the people outside the walls of the One State. In *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, they are the "book people" past the river and outside the city.
- The destruction of dystopia is frequently a very different sort of work than one in which it is preserved. Poul Anderson's short story "Sam Hall" depicts the subversion of a dystopia heavily dependant on surveillance. Robert Heinlein's "If This Goes On—" liberates the United States from a fundamentalist theocracy, where the underground rebellion is organized by the Freemasons. Cordwainer Smith's *The Rediscovery of Man* series depicts a society recovering from its dystopian period, beginning in "The Dead Lady of Clown Town" with the discovery that its utopia was impossible to maintain. Although these and other societies are typical of dystopias in many ways, they all have not only flaws but *exploitable* flaws. The ability of the protagonists to subvert the society also subverts the monolithic power typical of a dystopia.
- If destruction is not possible, *escape* may be, if the dystopia does not control the world. In Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, the main character succeeds in fleeing and finding tramps who have dedicated themselves to memorizing books to preserve them. In the book *Logan's Run*, the main characters make their way to an escape from the otherwise inevitable euthanasia on their 21st birthday (30th in the later film version). Because such dystopias must necessarily control less of the world than the protagonist can reach, and the protagonist can elude capture, this motif also subverts the dystopia's power.
- Occasionally, the escape from dystopia is made possible by time travel and changing history. Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, though chiefly concerned with the protagonist's time-travel to a future utopia, also has her travel

to a dystopia, and in the current time, stymies the efforts that will lead to that future. Poul Anderson's *The Corridors of Time* has a protagonist recruited by one future society to fight another, dystopian one; learning that both societies are dystopian (in very different ways), he acts to prevent either one gaining the upper hand in their time-traveling wars, enabling the future emergence of a utopian state. In its time, such a dystopia can be quite as powerful as any other. However, the time travel necessarily moves portions of the story, and usually quite large portions, out of the time of the dystopia, making it less an overwhelming presence in the novel.

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*Spoilers end here.*

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## Criticism of the concept of dystopias

Just as some modern philosophers, political theorists, and writers have dismissed ideas of perfect societies or "utopias", many have also expressed skepticism regarding the likelihood of a real-life dystopia of the kind described by Orwell and others. Although there have been many absolutist states in human history, Gregg Easterbrook and others have argued that such societies tend to rapidly self-destruct or be destroyed by neighbors. Dictatorships and similar regimes tend to be short-lived, as their policies and actions are almost continually leading to the creation of new potential opponents. For example, the killing or "disappearance" of critics and activists only serves to anger their family or friends, who in turn continue the struggle against the regime, and so on.

Absolutist states with socialist leanings often fail, it is argued, as a result of the unworkable nature of an economic system which fails to meet the need of the populations for food, work or income, rather than as a result of the direct persecution of their own citizens.

## Depictions of dystopias in various media

Dystopias are a common theme in many kinds of fiction. The lists linked below contain extensive lists of works with dystopian themes.

- [List of dystopian comics](#)
- [List of dystopian literature](#)
- [List of dystopian films](#)
- [List of dystopian music, TV programs, and games](#)

## See also

- Social fiction
- Soft science fiction
- Utopia
- Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic science fiction
- Fable
- Cyberpunk

## References

- ↑ Cacotopia (caco = bad) was the term used by Jeremy Bentham in his 19th century works ([1] (<http://www.randomhouse.com/wotd/index.pperl?date=19980528>) , [2] (<http://www.netcharles.com/orwell/articles/col-dystopia.htm>) , [3] (<http://books.google.com/books?ie=UTF-8&vid=ISBN157181440X&id=3ye0vWc85eYC&pg=PA230&lpg=PA230&> )
- ↑ John Stuart Mill uses the term dystopia in a parliamentary speech, possibly the first recorded use of the term. Exploring Dystopia ([http://hem.passagen.se/replikant/dystopia\\_timeline.htm](http://hem.passagen.se/replikant/dystopia_timeline.htm)) , last accessed on 19th March 2006, see also [4]

(<http://books.google.com/books?ie=UTF-8&vid=ISBN157181440X&id=3ye0vWc85eYC&pg=PA230&lpg=PA230&>

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