

A LEVEL

Contextual Information

ENGLISH LITERATURE

Dystopia

Teacher Guide

H472/02



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Lit in colour

Overview

This pack is intended as a starting point for engaging with contextual information relating to the topic ***Dystopia***.

Relevant periods, movements and events are glossed with some suggestions for further sources that may prove useful. The selections identified can be used as sources for understanding, support for discussions, as well as starting points for further reading and research (as well as being accessible and student-friendly).

This resource should not be considered exhaustive or content that students are required to learn – these are some starting points for contextual information that may help enhance textual study.

Lit in Colour

Lit in Colour partnership

OCR is a named partner for the Lit in Colour project. Lit in Colour was created by Penguin Books UK and [The Runnymede Trust](#), to support UK schools to make the teaching and learning of English literature more inclusive of writers of colour. The campaign published research in 2021 which investigated the barriers to inclusivity schools in England currently face.

Our involvement provides us with additional expertise and support as we diversify our own Literature qualifications.

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Contents

Key terms	4
Publishing context	5
Wider literary context	7
Influences	7
Satire, utopia and early dystopia	7
Science Fiction	8
Post-Second World War dystopia	9
Impact	10
Rise of gendered dystopia	10
Eco-dystopia	11
Young Adult Fiction	11
Social and historical context	13
Industrialisation and technological advances	13
Conflict between capitalism and socialism	13
Modern chemical weaponry	14
The nuclear threat	15
Social Darwinism and eugenics	16
American eugenics	16
Eugenics and the Nazis	17
Authoritarianism and the Second World War	18
Climate change	21
Thematic context questions	22
Biographical context	23
George Orwell (1903-1950)	23
Letter by and documentary on Orwell	23
Margaret Atwood (1939-)	23
Interviews with and essays by Atwood	24
Suggested authors: biographical pointers	24
Further sources	26

A note on access: Where possible we have linked to Open Access sources but this has not always been possible. Some of the sources listed in this document are held by online journal archives which you may have institutional access to. For sources held by JSTOR, we should note that JSTOR does offer free access to 100 articles a month via their free personal account.

Content warning: This topic, and its texts, do engage with topics of violence, sexual violence, racism, sexism, misogyny, death. Some of the contextual material and sources here may draw on or refer to these topics. Some sources linked to may feature historical documents including racist and sexist terminology and expressions.

Key terms

Utopia: a place or world of ideal perfection, particularly in law, government and social conditions for the people.

Dystopia: the opposite of utopia, a place or world in total disharmony, in which the conditions and quality of life only perpetuate suffering. As a literary genre, it describes a subset of speculative fiction, setting a vision of a future of the worst kind.

Speculative fiction: currently used as an umbrella term for genres of literature that offer engagement with a speculative vision of the world or possible worlds.

Authoritarian: demanding complete obedience, refusing to allow freedom. This is a term generally applied to governments or rulers to describe their approach to control.

Fascism: a political system based on extreme pride in a country and race, where a singular leader has far reaching state control and in which political opposition is not tolerated.

Capitalism: a political and economic system characterised by economic competition in a free market, private and corporate ownership of goods and industrial production. Great Britain and the United States are two of the world's largest capitalist economies.

Socialism: a political and economic system that advocates for the means of industrial production, distribution and exchange to be owned collectively by the people or the state.

Communism: a political and economic system that aims to replace private property and a profit-based economy with public ownership and communal control of the natural resources, as well as the major means of industrial production and consumption. This was the official state policy of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

Dehumanisation: the process of removing human qualities from a person, e.g. denying capacity for individual thought, consideration for others, reducing people to the status of things.

Anarchy: a situation in which there is no centralised organisation or control and no effective or practising government.

Dissent: the voicing of a strong difference of opinion, but especially in response to popular beliefs or official policy.

Surveillance: the close observation of people and places. Initially used in the context of policy and crime, surveillance can be undertaken by the police, the state or the general public depending on the context.

Publishing context

The OCR text list for the Dystopia topic begins late in the nineteenth century with H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. The next text, Huxley's *Brave New World*, appeared between the wars, and its interest in social engineering chimes with the rise of fascism in Europe in the Thirties, where methods of racial purification were pursued by the Nazi regime. Most of the texts, however, were written after the Second World War, reflecting a world which had witnessed human suffering and destruction on a scale hitherto unimagined. Dystopian fiction has been both a creative and a political response to the pain humanity inflicts on itself.

Increasingly, dystopian writing has expanded to include destruction of the environment: the most recent text, *The Road*, shows a world which has suffered devastation; the new addition to the list, *Parable of the Sower*, tackles both environmental and political issues, and unusually offers a new religion as part of its response to the harm it perceives in the world. It has in recent years become a particularly popular genre within young adult fiction, as explored elsewhere in this pack.

Below we've outlined some key publishing context for the core and suggested texts listed for this topic. The core texts are highlighted in green.

***The Time Machine* by H. G. Wells (1895)**

The novel has a complicated publication history, first appearing in serial form in *The New Review*, with the first book edition arriving later that year. The first book edition was assembled using a slightly different manuscript than that which appeared in serial form. It has spawned a large number of adaptations, sequels and other works inspired by the concept of time-travel. The novel was generally well received.

***Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley (1932)**

This was Huxley's fifth novel and his first dystopian work. Huxley said that he began the novel as a response to H. G. Wells' utopian writings, saying that he had 'been having a little fun pulling the leg of H. G. Wells', but then he 'got caught up in the excitement of [his] own ideas'. Despite the novel's longevity, it has frequently been banned and challenged since its original publication, especially in the United States.

***Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell (1949)**

This was Orwell's last novel, published shortly before his death. The novel generally received high praise on publication but did polarise opinion for its bleak outlook on the future. It has become a classic literary example of political and dystopian fiction. It also popularised the term 'Orwellian' as an adjective, with many terms used in the novel entering common usage, including 'Big Brother', 'doublethink' and 'Thought Police'.

***Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury (1951)**

This was Bradbury's second novel, developed from some of his earlier short stories, 'Bright Phoenix' and 'The Pedestrian' into a novella called 'The Fireman'. Bradbury was approached to double the story's length resulting in *Fahrenheit 451*. The novel was also serialised over three months in *Playboy* and split critical opinion on release, both in the mainstream and science fiction press. The novel won a number of awards including the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Literature for 1954. In the years since publication it has been subject to localised censorship and bowdlerisation.

***The Drowned World* by J. G. Ballard (1962)**

This was Ballard's second published novel. It received mixed reviews on publication, but won a powerful endorsement from Kingsley Amis, who compared Ballard with Joseph Conrad. As with some of these other novels, it was an expansion of a novella first published in the magazine *Science Fiction Adventures*. The novel has been identified as a founding text in eco-dystopia and climate fiction.

A Clockwork Orange by Anthony Burgess (1962)

This was Burgess' ninth novel, published later in the same year as Ballard's novel above. Burgess cited an incident suffered by his wife during the Blitz during the Second World War as inspiration for the novel. The novel was well reviewed but always controversial, partly because of Stanley Kubrick's film version of 1971, which Burgess long distanced himself from. After it was cited as having inspired copycat acts of violence, the film was withdrawn from British cinemas at Kubrick's behest.

The Memoirs of a Survivor by Doris Lessing (1974)

This was the sixth of many novels Lessing published, some initially under a pseudonym. In 2007 at the age of 88 she received the Nobel Prize for Literature. *Memoirs of a Survivor* has been classed as 'feminist science fiction'; Lessing suggested that it is deeply personal, even 'an attempt at autobiography'.

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood (1985)

This was Atwood's fifth novel and she considers this novel a work of speculative fiction, not science fiction. The novel was published to critical acclaim and has continued to be influential. It won the 1985 Governor General's Award and the first Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1987; it was also nominated for the 1986 Booker Prize. Atwood has written a sequel, *The Testaments*, which shared the 2019 Booker Prize with Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*.

The Children of Men by P. D. James (1992)

This was the twelfth of P. D. James's nineteen novels, and the only dystopian fiction she wrote. Her other novels were mostly crime fiction and many were adapted for television; her last novel was a sequel to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. *The Children of Men* was well received, including in a positive *New York Times* review; it was felt to be James's most serious work of social commentary. It was adapted for film in 2006 by director Alfonso Cuarón.

Parable of the Sower by Octavia Butler (1993)

This was Butler's tenth novel, the first in an unfinished series of novels, followed by *Parable of the Talents* in 1998. It was the winner of multiple awards, including the *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year for 1994. Butler is considered a pre-eminent American writer of science-fiction and credited for her attention to race, gender and power within the genre.

The Road by Cormac McCarthy (2006)

This is the tenth of ten novels by Cormac McCarthy. McCarthy has said that the inspiration for the book came during a 2003 visit to El Paso, Texas, with his young son; the novel is based on an imagined picture of the pair fifty to a hundred years into the future. He took only six weeks to write it and dedicated it to his son. The novel was awarded the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction in 2006.

Other dystopian novels in this time period:

1. *The War of the Worlds* by H. G. Wells (1898)
2. *The Iron Heel* by Jack London (1908)
3. *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin (1924)
4. *It Can't Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis (1935)
5. *Earth Abides* by George R. Stewart (1949)
6. *The Day of the Triffids* by John Wyndham (1951)
7. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick (1968)
8. *Make Room! Make Room!* by Harry Harrison (1966)
9. *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut (1969)
10. *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K. Le Guin (1974)
11. *Riddley Walker* by Russell Hoban (1980)
12. *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro (2005)
13. *Station Eleven* by Emily St John Mandel (2014)
14. *The Power* by Naomi Alderman (2016)
15. *Severance* by Ling Ma (2018)

Wider literary context

Influences

Satire, utopia and early dystopia

John Carey has described dystopia as ‘merely a utopia from another point of view’. Both forms deal in imagined worlds where the writer is offering insights into a particular, often apparently novel, way of life. Although the Utopia is theoretically an idealised picture of a flawless community, writers have often started by depicting such a community only to reveal that the concept is flawed, even sinister; such writings can often be satirical in intention.

Thomas More’s *Utopia*, written in Latin and published in 1516, is often held to be one of the earliest examples of the form. The book’s subtitle, roughly translated, declares its intention to discuss ‘The Best Kind of a Republic’. The title *Utopia* is derived from Greek and translates as ‘no-place’ or ‘nowhere’, apparently revealing More’s satirical intention. Samuel Butler makes a different version of the same joke in his work of 1872, *Erewhon*, (or ‘Nowhere’ backwards, more-or-less). This work is a satire on various aspects of Victorian society: for example, criminals in *Erewhon* (reached via balloon-flight) are treated as if they were ill, whereas sick people are treated as criminals.

Other early writers of dystopia similarly sought to offer thinly-veiled comment on their own society: for example, Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Coming Race* (1871) envisages an athletic people who live underground and have mastered something suspiciously like electricity called ‘Vril’. Bulwer-Lytton’s utopia only threatens as a dystopia in the final pages, when it becomes clear that the subterraneans will soon need more space and challenge the Victorians living on the surface. The novel anticipates struggles about gender, over-population and the electronic world.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Utopian work *Herland* was first published in the periodical *The Forerunner* in 1915 and appearing for the first time in book form in 1979. This text features a society entirely run by and composed of women, depending on a method of asexual reproduction. The results are utopian indeed – the women are intelligent, strong and capable, and live purposeful and happy lives, untroubled by issues such as war, conflict and male oppression. The events of the novel develop around the disruptive presence of three assertive young men who discover the community.

Another precursor to some of the midcentury novels on the OCR list is *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin (1924). Originally written in Russian, but first published in English, Zamyatin’s novel is influenced by life under early Soviet rule at the end of the 1910s. Zamyatin may also have been influenced by Wells himself, as they met during the latter’s visits to the Soviet Union in 1920.

Find out more

For information on early dystopian fiction, it’s worth looking at the British Library’s articles on [‘Visions of the future’](#) in their Romantic and Victorian strand of Discovering Literature

[‘HG Wells’The Time Machine reviewed - archive, 1895’](#), *The Manchester Guardian*, 11th June 1895

[‘Dystopian Literature: Dystopian Novels \(1872 to 1960’s\)’](#), Miami Dade College Library Guide

Christensen, Andrew G. [‘Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* and the Tradition of the Scientific Utopia’](#), *Utopian Studies* Vol. 38 No. 2 (2017) p.286-304

Fitting, Peter, ‘Utopia, dystopia and science fiction’ in ed. Gregory Claeys, [The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature](#), (Cambridge University Press, 2010) p. 135-53

Gray, John, [‘How Yevgeny Zamyatin shaped dystopian fiction’](#), *New Statesman*, 27th January 2021

Orwell, George, [‘Freedom and Happiness’](#), *Tribune*, 4th January 1946 excerpted on Orwell Foundation website

West, Lindy, [‘Herland: the forgotten feminist classic about a civilisation without men’](#) *The Guardian*, 30th March 2015

Wilson, Jennifer, [‘The Century-Old Russian Novel Said to Have Inspired “1984”’](#), *The New York Times*, 2nd November 2021

Windling, Terri, [‘Afterword: A Short History of Dystopian Fiction’](#) excerpted from ed. Datlow, Ellen; Windling, Terri, *After: Nineteen Stories of Apocalypse and Dystopia*

Science Fiction

Dystopia is often categorised as subgenre within science fiction. The genre of science fiction as we know it arguably emerged in the late nineteenth century with works such as those by H. G. Wells. This tended to refer to fiction concerned with science, scientific discovery or technology. Wells' work blending adventure and exploration with scientific concerns was commonly referred to 'scientific romance', creating stories which put ordinary people in extraordinary situations. Wells also drew on his studies at the Normal School of Science in London, under the eminent biologist and Darwinist Thomas Huxley (Aldous Huxley's grandfather). Wells felt work that featured scientific elements should strive for the appearance of realism or credibility.

In the early part of the twentieth century, the creation of a mass literary culture led to a rapidly expanding market for popular fiction. 'Pulp' magazines, so-called after the cheap paper on which they were printed, catered for a variety of genres, including crime, westerns, romances and increasingly science fiction. As serious Modernist writers of the Thirties like Aldous Huxley were deploring the effects of science and technology on modern life, the 'pulp', especially in America, were celebrating their own version of science with magazine titles such as *Amazing Stories: the Magazine of Scientification*. Space settings were especially common and action adventures describing conflicts with aliens a stock-in-trade. This world was heavily male-dominated, to the extent that some female writers, like Catherine Moore, hid their gender behind pseudonyms (she wrote as C. L. Moore). The appearance of the magazines, with garish covers and black and white illustrations, began the move of science fiction away from print and towards the visual.

The period of the Forties and Fifties is sometimes called the Golden Age of science fiction, dominated by writers who were white, American and male. One of these was Isaac Asimov, most famously known for his robot fiction in which robots must obey certain rules, the first of which is that they should not hurt a human being. It is worth noting the ways in which science fiction became especially popular with the public and a genuine focus of publishing houses in and after the Second World War.

Robert Heinlein, another major figure of the Golden Age and often credited with the popularisation of the term 'speculative fiction', produced work less ethical than political in nature; later in life he became increasingly right wing, and his 1959 novel *Starship Troopers* is very militaristic. There were many other male writers of this period but relatively few women, including Leigh Brackett, who later wrote the screenplay for *The Empire Strikes Back*, and Katherine MacLean, a scientist and writer of short stories and novels whose publishing career stretched into the 1970s. British science fiction of the same time, featuring such writers as John Wyndham (*The Day of the Triffids*), Arthur C. Clarke (*The City and the Stars*) and John Christopher (*The Death of Grass*), was generally more downbeat, memorably described by Brian Aldiss as 'cosy catastrophe'.

Science fiction in the Sixties and Seventies became more fragmented and varied, often investigating mystical concerns and dealing in stylistic experimentation. Major writers in this period included Philip K. Dick, with works like *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (filmed as *Blade Runner* in 1982), and Ursula K. Le Guin, whose 1968 work *A Wizard of Earthsea* was written for a young adult audience. The popular interest in the genre was shifting to the screen, however: Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* was released in cinemas in 1968, and *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who* both made their first appearances on television in the 1960s.

As a genre of popular fiction, science fiction is seen by some as occupying contested space in literary studies. While some writers of literary fiction seek to distance themselves from the genre (quite famously Margaret Atwood calls her work speculative rather than science fiction), others are very open about its influence on their output. Octavia Butler, whose career began with her own teenage enthusiasm for sci-fi material from the 'Golden Age', was a prolific writer of science fiction, as well as speculative fiction more broadly. Likewise, Ballard and Bradbury got their starts writing short fiction for science fiction magazines.

Find out more

['Science Fiction'](#), Encyclopaedia Britannica

BBC Teach, ['Writing the future: A timeline of science fiction literature'](#), BBC

Evans, Arthur B., ['The Origins of Science Fiction Criticism: From Kepler to Wells'](#), *Science Fiction Studies* Vol. 26 No. 2 (1999), p.163-186

Roberts, Adam, ['The History of Science Fiction'](#), (Palgrave: 2016) (eBook linked; requires purchase)

Tyym, Marshall B., ['Science Fiction: A Brief History and Review of Criticism'](#), *American Studies International* Vol. 23 No. 1 (April 1985) p.41-66

Post-Second World War dystopia

Dystopian works were published in much greater numbers after the two World Wars. The scale of suffering and death, the use of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki coupled with the rise of the Cold War and the doctrine of 'mutual assured destruction', fear for the future was firmly on the agenda. Political disillusionment is expressed as early as 1940 in Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, a novel set in 1939 during the Stalinist Great Purge and the Moscow show trials. A precursor to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the novel refers to the Soviet government as 'the Party' and to Nazi Germany as 'the Dictatorship'.

Nineteen Eighty-Four followed in 1948, again modelling a totalitarian government on Stalinist Russia. Its perpetually warring totalitarian superstates control the world of the novel, and are reminiscent of the constant threat of nuclear conflict following the Second World War. Orwell's work operated as a powerful influence on Margaret Atwood in her creation of the totalitarian state of Gilead in her novel of 1985, *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Find out more

['Where the Rainbow Ends'](#), *TIME*, 20th June 1949 p. 93-96

Shiau, Yvonne, ['The Rise of Dystopian Fiction: From Soviet Dissidents to 70's Paranoia to Murakami'](#), Electric Literature, 26th July 2017

Impact

Rise of gendered dystopia

The role of women and gender-based oppression has always been of interest within dystopian writing. However, in the wake of political movements fighting for women's equality in the mid-twentieth century, dystopia has operated as an ideal genre in which to explore the possible results of this oppression. One of the central concerns explored is women's reproductive capacity and their adherence to gender norms in society at large.

Though male writers of dystopia like Harry Harrison in *Make Room! Make Room!* (1967) have traced the hideous impact of over-population on the urban way of life, women writers have often explored the commodification and social value of women's reproductive ability, along with societal fears about fertility more widely. In texts such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, a general decline in fertility has led to the exploitation of fertile women, or 'handmaids', so that the privilege of reproduction can be reserved for the wealthy and powerful in Gilead. The treatment of women in the novel more generally reflects attitudes of the Christian right in the United States, so that women's roles are heavily defined and their freedoms curtailed. The novel ends ambiguously, unclear as to whether the handmaid of the title, Offred, has escaped to a better life or been tricked by the 'Eyes', the secret police, into entering a trap. The story has at length been resolved, however, in Atwood's 2019 sequel, *The Testaments*, narrated by three different female characters, and charting the inevitable fall of Gilead.

Fertility in P. D. James's *The Children of Men* is more seriously threatened: the novel is set in an England which is afflicted by mass infertility, and as a result is depopulating and facing a crisis of ageing. The novel focuses on issues of power and control, and on questions of how to satisfy and sustain a population which is weakening and dying out. The birth of a baby at the end of the novel seems like a miracle indeed and offers a symbol of hope. More recent novels like Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* and Leni Zumas' *Red Clocks* develop dystopian concerns about state-mandated child separation as well as restrictions for abortion and in-vitro fertilisation science.

Beyond this focus on reproductive capacity, gendered dystopias often extrapolate a possible future based on current gendered oppression (Maggie Shen King's *An Excess Male*, Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps*). Gendered dystopias often explore social and power dynamics derived by women either being denied basic autonomy (Joyce Carol Oates' *Hazards of Time Travel*; Christina Dalcher's *Vox*), being granted some power or skill (Naomi Alderman's *The Power*) or posits masculinity itself as a literal danger (*Y: The Last Man*; Sophie Mackintosh's *The Water Cure*).

Find out more

Alter, Alexandra, '[How Feminist Dystopian Fiction Is Channeling Women's Anger and Anxiety](#)', *The New York Times*, 8th October 2018

Delistraty, Cody, '[Welcome to Dystopian Realism](#)', *Vulture*, 8th January 2019

Gilbert, Sophie, '[The Remarkable Rise of the Feminist Dystopia](#)', *The Atlantic*, 4th October 2018

ed. Wilson, Sharon R. *Women's Utopian and Dystopian Fiction* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing: 2013)

Eco-dystopia

Dystopian works involve threats to a way of life, and increasingly writers have engaged with environmental issues in their dystopian scenarios. One of the leading writers in this area is Margaret Atwood, whose 2003 novel *Oryx and Crake* deals in the damage caused by scientific plans to control the population through genetic engineering and deliberate creation of a global pandemic. In this novel, the destruction and suffering are caused by scientific intervention into human lives which has a catastrophic effect.

By contrast, J. G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962), which appears on OCR's list, deals with a world disappearing under water as the result of rising sea levels. The central characters in the novel are scientists researching environmental effects in a flooded, largely abandoned London landscape. The novel is an interesting example of Eco-dystopia since human activity is not blamed for the environmental change and the newly tropical landscape has its own strange beauty; at the end of the novel, Dr Robert Kerans, weak and alone, travels south, described as 'a second Adam searching for the forgotten paradises of the reborn sun.'

Recent dystopian novels often include evidence of environmental damage as an inevitable part of our lives, even if these are not the chief cause of the crisis in the novel. Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) features a USA setting where rain is almost unheard of, and where fresh water is at a premium. The landscape her characters travel through is scarred and damaged, but the novel is dominated by political and social issues rather than environmental ones: there is a suggestion that water shortages and anxieties about climate are features of political neglect, especially since they do not afflict the wealthy.

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* depicts a world which has suffered extreme damage in an unspecified catastrophic event. The novel shows a man and his young son struggling for survival in a harsh landscape, constantly threatened by physical danger and other survivors, most of whom are hostile. Like Butler's novel, survival is the main aim, but the environment is more seriously degraded and the hope wears very thin. Both texts offer some moral insights, although the McCarthy goes little further than identifying 'the good guys', whereas Butler's protagonist has constructed an entire theology.

Find out more

Copley, Soraya, '[Rereading Marge Piercy and Margaret Atwood: Eco-feminist Perspectives on Nature and Technology](#)', *Critical Survey* Vol. 25, No.2 (2013) p.40-56

Doherty, Alison, '[5 Eco-Dystopian Novels That Explore Environmental Worst Case Scenarios](#)', *Book Riot*, 26th August 2020

Hughes, Rowland; Wheeler, Pat, '[Introduction Eco-Dystopias: Nature and the Dystopian Imagination](#)', *Critical Survey* Vol. 25, No. 2 (2013), p.1–6.

Slagel, Jamie, '[Ecocriticism in Dystopia / Dystopia as Ecocriticism](#)', *Broadstreet Humanities Review* No. 4, February 2021

Stableford, Brian, 'Ecology and Dystopia' in ed. Gregory Claeys, [The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature](#), (Cambridge University Press, 2010) p. 259-81

Young Adult Fiction

Teenage and child protagonists feature in three of the novels on OCR's list: *A Clockwork Orange*, *Parable of the Sower* and *The Road*. All of these are unquestionably written for an adult audience, using this alternative perspective to explore the impacts of social collapse on the young. *The Road* focuses on the experience of a father and son and sees the boy through to the point where he will have to manage without his father. *Parable of the Sower* features a teenage female protagonist, Lauren Olamina, who rises to the challenges of the times and leads a diverse group to relative safety through a dangerous landscape. Lauren's experiences also involve a challenging theology and will lead to a more troubled future in her mature years in the sequel, *Parable of the Talents*.

In recent years, fiction written for teenagers, or young adults, has seen its own wave of dystopian fiction. Its popularity can be seen as enabling expression of the fears of young people, and often depicts them pitted successfully against the threats of modern (or even future) life.

The best-known recent publication in the genre is Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-10), which has been successfully adapted into film. The trilogy features protagonist Katniss Everdeen, who fights for social justice against the corrupt rulers of Panem, a dystopian nation in North America. The trilogy deals with corrupt political rule including the mistreatment of the poor, and also engages with the cruelty of reality television by depicting an annual competition where young adults fight with each other to the death for the purpose of popular entertainment. The novels might also provoke thought about the struggles of the disadvantaged. Critics have noted with interest the conclusion of the trilogy, which is more ambiguous than might be expected in works for younger readers, leaving Katniss troubled and damaged by her experiences despite her victory.

The Maze Runner (2008) has been similarly successful and was made into a film released in 2014. James Dashner, the author, explained that his initial idea was of 'a bunch of teenagers living inside an unsolvable Maze full of hideous creatures, in the future, in a dark, dystopian world. It would be an experiment, to study their minds. Terrible things would be done to them – awful things; completely hopeless – until the victims turn everything on its head.' Again, this is a story of young people triumphing over corrupt forces which seek to control and exploit them. In this case, the victims arrive in the maze with no memory, so that they have to make sense of everything from first principles. As with *The Hunger Games*, there have been further volumes in the series, starting with *The Scorch Trials* (2010) and *The Death Cure* (2011), as well as two prequel novels, *The Kill Order* (2012) and *The Fever Code* (2016), a novella titled *Crank Palace* (2020), and a companion book titled *The Maze Runner Files* (2013).

Find out more

Donston-Miller, Debra, ['Why Young Adults 'Hunger' for the Hunger Games and Other Post-Apocalyptic Dystopian Fiction'](#), Forbes, 20th November 2014.

Scholes, Justin; Ostenson, Jon, ['Understanding the Appeal of Dystopian Young Adult Fiction'](#) *The Assembly on Literature for Adolescents Review*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Winter 2013)

Oladele, Bashirat, ['Why the YA dystopia craze finally burned out'](#), Polygon, 23rd May 2021

Social and historical context

Dystopian writing presents its readers with a world they can recognise, but which contains discernible differences from their own. The differences between our own world and the writers' created dystopian worlds generally fall into two groups: those which are broadly social/political, and those which are scientific/technological. These two groups are often related, of course, especially if scientific or environmental developments need to be addressed by social and political change.

In this section we've offered an introductory overview and directions to valuable resources for some of the key social and historical events during the period covered by the texts suggested for this topic.

Industrialisation and technological advances

The beginning of the period of OCR's text list occurs very late in the Victorian age, an era of substantial technological progress. Works of science fiction and dystopia from this time were often preoccupied with mechanisation and with transport in particular, influenced by technological advances such as the coming of the railways. With travel becoming easier and quicker, writers were equally quick to invent further technological advances: journeys in the air, underground, into space and even through time were easily imagined and made for exciting narratives. Within the span of thirty years between the 1880s and 1910s, we see the invention of the electric lightbulb, cars, and planes.

Technological advances in the twentieth century became more sinister, especially as technologies developed out of wartime uses and associated with the two World Wars. The First World War was remarkable for the use of data of military tactics combined with more powerful weaponry leading to tragic and unprecedented casualties. It is often said that this war marked a loss of innocence so that the excitement generated by nineteenth century technology was left in the past and technological advances became something to fear rather than to admire.

Find out more

Barton, River, '[Dystopia and the Promethean Nightmare](#)' in ed. Demerjian, Louisa MacKay, *The Age of Dystopia*, p. 5-18

Conflict between capitalism and socialism

With the rise of industrialisation also comes the rise of capitalism as the dominant political and economic structure of the West. Early critics of capitalism, like Frederick Engels explored how industrialisation had generated brutal working conditions and poor standards of living for workers in spite of technological advancement. Engels and Karl Marx, a fellow German philosopher, published *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848. This highlighted economic and political critiques of capitalism as a system, helping to codify what have become known as socialist principles established by other contemporary thinkers in Britain and France like Robert Owen and Pierre Leroux.

Communism and socialism were, for a time, totally interchangeable before gradations between the two ideologies became more established. For example, communism offered a view of socialism that sought not just to bring the means of production into public hands but consumption too. This distinction marks much of the Russian adoption of socialist principles after the Russian Revolution.

The conflict between capitalist and socialist (particularly communist) ideals, practice and structures proved to be a central ideological conflict of the twentieth century brought about by industrialisation.

Find out more

'[Capitalism](#)', Encyclopaedia Britannica

Gilbert, Pablo and O'Neill, Martin, '[Socialism](#)' in ed. Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019 Edition)

ed. Neal, Larry and Williamson, Jeffery G., *The Cambridge History of Capitalism*, (Cambridge University Press, 2014)

Modern chemical weaponry

The development of modern chemical weaponry during the First World War presented serious questions about science and ethics. The development of weapons that inflict damage simply through inhalation or brief physical contact changed society's understanding of the ways in which not just soldiers but the civilian population could be harmed.

The First World War saw the deployment of chlorine, mustard and phosgene gases, causing a cumulative 1.3 million casualties with between 90,000 to 100,000 fatalities. Chlorine was a choking agent, accompanied by a greenish-yellow gas. Mustard gas was a blistering agent, often causing later infections that could take the lives of combatants. Phosgene was particularly nightmarish given the fact that it was colourless and while slower to act six times deadlier than chlorine gas.

The scale of destruction and the ease with which these could be used was revolutionary. Notably, the effects of chemical weapons were not just physical but psychological, generating fear and panic that extended from the physical battlefield to the fear of future use against civilians. It resulted in the Geneva Protocol of 1925, which banned the use of chemical and biological agents in war but unfortunately didn't put any restrictions on their research or production. This meant that chemical weapons did continue to be used, for example, by Mussolini's Italy using mustard gas in the Italian-Ethiopian war, Spain using it in Morocco and allegedly Britain's use in Mesopotamia (now Iraq).

The Second World War famously sees the use of chemical weapons in the form of lethal gas against Jews and disabled people in the run up to and then the later years of the Second World War. The motivation for these attacks were eugenically motivated, rather than being used on the battlefield. The international response to the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime's use of chemical weapons led to renewed conversations about the restriction of chemical weaponry but did not lead to any binding solutions.

The other most famous use of chemical weaponry during the time period covered by our texts is the United States' use of napalm and Agent Orange (a herbicide) during the Vietnam War to great international protest. The results of the American chemical campaign lead not just to mass death, but to physical injury and deformities in the young for generations.

1972 saw the signing of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, which when combined with the Geneva Protocol, banned the development, production and possession of chemical weapons, but failed to put in place compliance mechanisms. This means that we have seen chemical warfare after the Vietnam War, most famously during the Iran-Iraq War, where Iraq used chemical weaponry against Iran and the Kurdish people. In 2013, sarin gas was used against civilians in the Syrian Civil War.

The use of chemical and biological weapons is something that we see throughout dystopian fiction, either by reference to the fear of their usage, or where the use of such weapons has resulted in some sort of apocalyptic wasteland, fundamentally changing society and its ability to support life. This is compounded by the nuclear threat, as discussed later in this pack.

Find out more

Office for Disarmament Affairs, '[Chemical Weapons](#)', United Nations

Black, Robin, '[Development, Historical Use and Properties of Chemical Warfare Agents](#)', *Chemical Warfare Toxicology, Volume 1: Fundamental Aspects* (2016), p.1-28

Biggs, David, '[Vietnam: The Chemical War](#)', *The New York Times*, 24th November 2017

Douglas, R. M., '["Did Britain Use Chemical Weapons in Mandatory Iraq?"](#)', *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 81, No. 4, (December 2009), p.859-87

Everts, Sarah, '[A Brief History of Chemical War](#)', Science History Institute, 11th May 2015

King, William, '[A brief history of chemical warfare: from Sparta to Syria](#)', LSE, 25th April 2017

The nuclear threat

Many of the post Second World War novels on our list in some way reflect concerns about the potential effects of nuclear proliferation. The use of nuclear weaponry against Japan in the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had a devastating death toll and ushered in a new era of fear and paranoia. The bomb detonated over Hiroshima killed 80,000 people instantly with tens of thousands later dying from radiation exposure. Around 40,000 people died in Nagasaki from the bomb alone.

Although initially only the United States possessed the technical knowledge and raw materials for nuclear weaponry, the USSR were quick to catch up, undertaking their first nuclear test in 1949. Relations between the US and the USSR soured very quickly after the end of the Second World War and very quickly descended into what was known as the Cold War. In the 1950s every major global superpower developed their own nuclear weapon programme and stockpile to be prepared in the event of future conflict.

The Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 is seen as the closest the world has ever got to nuclear destruction. This was an incident where the USSR planned to install nuclear armed missiles in Cuba, their socialist ally. As Cuba was just 90 miles from US shores, this was seen as an act of hostility and a potential act of war generating a tense, thirteen-day standoff between the US and the USSR.

Over the course of those 13 days, there were genuine fears that either the USSR or the US would launch nuclear missiles to break this conflict. Nuclear disaster was avoided when Khrushchev, the leader of the USSR, agreed to remove the missiles from Cuba in exchange for the US promising not to invade Cuba and removing American missiles from Turkey.

This was a period of genuine public fear as events escalated very quickly and disbelief in the fidelity of either nation fed into existing paranoia. It was however, a demonstration of what has become known as the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction, a deterrent policy that relies on both sides of a conflict having nuclear capabilities and therefore, an equal opportunity for mass destruction of their opponent.

Despite the climb down from the Cuban Missile Crisis, fears around the use or the potential use of nuclear weapons and therefore nuclear fallout were high. Students in the United States were taught to Duck and Cover to survive nuclear attack. Fallout shelters were built in the UK, alongside an official government campaign also aimed at children called Protect and Survive. There was a genuine sense that nuclear war may happen without warning and generated levels of anxiety in the global population that have rarely been matched. With growing understanding of the impacts of radiation sickness, these fears were only reinforced by further nuclear incidents, like the failure of the nuclear power station at Chernobyl.

The potential for nuclear conflict provided subject matter for many writers, such as Philip K. Dick in his 1965 novel, *Dr Bloodmoney, or How We Got Along After the Bomb*. This novel features a catastrophic nuclear strike on the USA in 1981, giving a somewhat fantastical account of how people 'got along' after it. His satirical purpose is communicated in the novel's title, which borrows from the 1964 black comedy film *Dr Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. We can see the impacts of Cold War fears around nuclear war and nuclear annihilation in much mid-century dystopian fictions. When we consider their use of wastelands, depictions of mass sickness or death, we can see their roots in public understanding of nuclear fallout.

Nevil Shute's post-nuclear dystopia *On the Beach* (1957) is perhaps the best imagining of a Cold War destruction of humanity. One by one the countries of the Southern hemisphere succumb to nuclear fall-out, while Shute describes the human cost and pain as the last outpost, Australasia, gives way.

Find out more

['Atomic Bomb History'](#), *History*, updated 21st February 2020

Buck, Stephanie, ['Fear of nuclear annihilation scarred children growing up in the Cold War, studies later showed'](#), *Timeline*, 29th August 2017

Hendershot, Cyndy. ["From Trauma to Paranoia: Nuclear Weapons, Science Fiction, and History."](#) *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (1999) p.73–90

Ropeik, David, ['The Rise of Nuclear Fear-How We Learned to Fear the Radiation'](#), *Scientific American*, 15th June 2012

Social Darwinism and eugenics

Dystopia as a genre is undoubtedly marked by its engagement with Social Darwinism and the eugenicist views of some of its early authors like H. G. Wells. **Social Darwinism** is a term used to describe a loose group of ideologies around race and class which used Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection to launder oppression.

Herbert Spencer, a sociologist and economist, coined the term 'survival of the fittest' in 1864, drawing a connection between his views on economics and natural selection. Spencer argued that philanthropy aiding the poor was preventing social progress, and that unrestricted economic competition would allow only the most industrious to thrive. Social Darwinism expanded on ideas not just from Darwin but from Francis Galton in his biological studies. He focused explicitly on 'improving' the human population through selective breeding, naming the field of study **eugenics**. Galton claimed that talent and genius were hereditary traits and that the less intelligent were more fertile, thereby affecting the population negatively on a greater scale.

The early decades of the twentieth century also saw a rising interest in eugenics. London hosted the First International Congress of Eugenics in 1912, held by Charles Darwin's son, Leonard. Many leading British politicians, including Neville Chamberlain and Winston Churchill (both of whom were members of the British Eugenics Society), subscribed to the theories of eugenics in the belief that they were a way of addressing the evils of crime and poverty to create improvements in the human race. Eugenicists advocated minimising reproduction among people held to be undesirable, most likely through sterilisation. This thinking lies behind Aldous Huxley's satirical work *Brave New World*, where the apparently utopian society depends on controlled incubation of embryos to deliver desired social types, from genius down to drudge.

Find out more

['Eugenics In Britain'](#), English Heritage

['Social Darwinism'](#), *History*, updated 21st August 2018

Baule, Amanda, ['Caution Over Evolution: H.G. Wells' The Time Machine as a Response to Social Darwinism'](#), University of Connecticut

Burdett, Carolyn, ['Post Darwin: social Darwinism, degeneration, eugenics'](#), the British Library, 15th May 2014

Gilbert, Martin, ['Leading Churchill Myths: "Churchill's campaign against the 'feeble-minded' was deliberately omitted by his biographers"'](#), *Finest Hour* Vol. 125, Autumn 2011

Weindling, Paul, ['Julian Huxley and the Continuity of Eugenics in Twentieth-century Britain'](#), *Journal of modern European history*, Vol. 10 No. 4 (November 2012), p.480-499.

American eugenics

Eugenics found a receptive audience in the United States too. Prominent early American eugenicists were Charles Davenport, Harry Laughlin and John Harvey Kellogg, the inventor of cornflakes. Kellogg set up the Race Betterment Foundation in 1906, before funding Davenport and Laughlin's Eugenics Record Office in 1910-11. Laughlin himself became a founding member of the American Eugenics Society, which included many powerful people in American culture like Alexander Graham Bell.

In the United States, a particular focus on using eugenics to eliminate negative traits dominated discourse, quickly moving beyond research and data collection to the passing of sterilisation laws. The first was in 1907 in Indiana, followed by California and 28 other states all by 1931. Laughlin was instrumental to this work, writing draft legislation to enable forced sterilisation. (He was also, perhaps unsurprisingly, a major force behind the 1924 Immigration Act which set strict quotas in an attempt to keep America's population safe from 'undesirable' races such as Jewish and Asian people.)

There was also crossover between figures in eugenics and the fight for contraceptive access otherwise known as birth control, with the two aims sometimes becoming unhelpfully intertwined. The conflicting legacy of Margaret Sanger, a primary activist for contraceptive access, is testament to this grey area.

California led the country in the number of sterilisation procedures: 20,000 or so were performed often without the knowledge or consent of the patients. These were initially focused on disabled people but expanded rapidly targeting anyone deemed unfit or unsuited to potential parenthood. A precedent set in 1927 by the Supreme Court in response to the treatment of Carrie Buck ultimately led to the sterilisation of 65,000 Americans with mental illnesses or developmental disabilities from 1920 to the 1970s.

Sterilisation programmes in US also disproportionately targeted women of colour. Southern states targeted Black women for undisclosed procedures under the guise of other care, giving rise to the term 'Mississippi Appendectomy'. Mexican-American women were sterilised under duress while giving birth. Widespread use of forced abortion and sterilisation against Native American women continued well into the 1980s. It is perhaps unsurprising that gendered dystopias centring around non-consensual interference with reproduction have been a mainstay. Native American author Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* takes on further layers of meaning in light of these histories.

Find out more

['Eugenics and Birth Control'](#), American Experience, Public Broadcasting Service

Boggs, Belle, ['For the Public Good: The Shameful History of Forced Sterilization in the U.S.'](#) *The New New South*, August 2013

Carlaw, Brooke, ['Early American Eugenics Movement'](#), History of Women in the United States, the University of Washington Tacoma, 12th December 2019

DenHoed, Andrea, ['The Forgotten Lessons of the American Eugenics Movement'](#), *The New Yorker*, 27th April 2016

Ko, Lisa, ['Unwanted Sterilization and Eugenics Programs in the United States'](#), Independent Lens, Public Broadcasting Service, 29th January 2016

Lombardo, Paul, ['Eugenic Sterilization Laws'](#), Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement

Eugenics and the Nazis

Eugenics is most linked in the public consciousness with the Nazi regime, who were explicitly inspired by the work of American eugenicists. Once in control of the Reichstag in 1933, they passed the Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring and used the success of Californian sterilisation laws as a way to bolster their proposal. Charles Davenport was on the editorial board of two German journals publishing on so called 'racial hygiene' (the ideology or practice of keeping a race of people pure by not allowing those considered inferior to have children). The Rockefeller Foundation helped to fund the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics between 1930 and 1939, all while receiving reports on the Institute's work. Hitler himself had corresponded with Leon Whitney, executive secretary of the American Eugenics Society.

In 1939, the Nazis' first foray into racial hygiene was through a programme focused on systematic killing of children born with physical and mental disabilities, euphemistically referred to as a 'euthanasia campaign'. Initially, parents of infants and toddlers with disabilities were encouraged to send them to special paediatric clinics where children were either neglected until death or administered lethal overdoses. This campaign was eventually extended to adults in late 1939 and by 1940, selected patients were being shuttled to gas chambers. Between January 1940 and August 1941, at least 70,273 disabled people had been murdered. Although the programme 'officially' ended in August 1941, it continued in more decentralised ways right up until the end of the war. This programme proved inspiration for the mechanised mass murder of Jewish people known as the [Final Solution](#), where approximately 2,700,000 Jewish people were murdered by gas or shooting and a total of approximately 6 million Jews were killed during the Holocaust as a whole.

The [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#) has some excellent sources and teaching materials. We've drawn from information they hold on the [euthanasia programme](#), [racial hygiene](#) and [the Final Solution](#).

Find out more

There are also some really thoughtful materials put together from a more broadly European perspective by UCL's [Centre for Holocaust Education](#)

['Hitler's debt to America'](#), *The Guardian*, 6th February 2004

Black, Edwin, ['The Horrifying American Roots of Nazi Eugenics'](#), History News Network, George Washington University, September 2003

Farber, Steven A., ['U.S. Scientists' Role in the Eugenics Movement \(1907–1939\): A Contemporary Biologist's Perspective'](#), *Zebrafish* Vol. 5 no. 4, (December 2008), p.243-245

Ross, Alex, ['How American Racism Influenced Hitler'](#), *The New Yorker*, 23rd April 2018

Authoritarianism and the Second World War

Dystopian fiction after the First World War often examines the nature of political control and the value of freedom and drew on many real life regimes in their envisioning of authoritarian or totalitarian states. Stalin's regime in the USSR, particularly as it unfolded in the 1930s, forms the prototype for Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* while many dystopian texts envisage fascist takeover, such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The definitions of these terms often generate some overlap but most political scientists and historians position authoritarianism as the broad umbrella term to describe regimes demanding complete obedience and refuse to allow freedom. This section discusses the regimes of four authoritarian leaders who came to power between the 1910s and 1950s: Josef Stalin, Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, and Francisco Franco.

Stalin's rise to power came through his nomination as General Secretary for the newly incorporated USSR by Lenin in 1922. His rise was uniquely lacking in violence though after Lenin's death Stalin is quick to silence his critics. That same year, Mussolini became Prime Minister Italy after the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF, National Fascist Party) organised a coup d'état and the March on Rome. A year later in Germany, Hitler's *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP or Nazi Party) also attempted a coup, the Munich Putsch, which was unsuccessful and resulted in Hitler's ten-month jail sentence during which he wrote *Mein Kampf*.

In Spain, Franco was part of a military coup to depose the Republican Spanish government and reinstall the monarchy. Though this coup also failed, it began the Spanish Civil War of 1936-7 in which a raft of international citizens joined the Republicans to fight against fascism and Franco's forces. This included a number of writers like Ernest Hemingway and George Orwell. Aided by the Italian Fascists and German Nazis, Franco's forces won and he was installed as *Caudillo*.

Stalin was very much an authoritarian socialist, whose approach to communist rule is now named after him. Hitler and Mussolini can most clearly be described as fascists. Franco led a military dictatorship that aligned with Spanish fascist and nationalist parties to consolidate power. It's hard to provide a universally agreed definition of fascism, as a marker of fascist movements is both their adaptation to context and their opportunism. There are, however, common features that mark out fascist ideologies and nation making. Umberto Eco has written extensively about this in [an essay for the New York Review of Books](#), which is well worth students reading.

When considering the markers of authoritarian regimes, we're going to focus on eight key aspects, which are shared by all four regimes. These are:

- Sudden, often violent rise to power or seizing of control
- Consolidation of state power in the leader's hands
- Dissolution of political opposition
- Use of state threats and surveillance
- Monsterring or Othering of established national enemy
- Use of state violence
- Suspension of the free press and crushing of dissent
- Cultural control and revisionist propaganda.

Consolidation of state power

Mussolini spent approximately 18 months dismantling democracy while appearing, on the surface, to maintain usual governmental process. When elections took place in 1924, the National Fascist Party received 64% of the vote (achieved largely through the consolidation of other nationalist parties as well as intimidation).

When Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933, he followed a very similar trajectory to Mussolini by appearing to work within the usual democratic system while also operating to consolidate power for himself. However, he took far less time than Mussolini, achieving consolidation within the year.

At the end of the Civil War, Franco joined the Fascist and Monarchist parties together with the backing of the Catholic Church to form the state political party *Falange Española Tradicionalista* (FET) and began his 40 year military dictatorship. Many of the institutions and systems of Spanish government were left in place but one major change was made: the official dissolution of other political parties.

Destruction of opposition

Setting the template is Mussolini's dissolution of all opposition parties and banning of elections after the assassination of Giacomo Matteotti, leader of the Italian Communist Party. Matteotti had raised concerns about the election being a sham and days later was found assassinated by fascist thugs. After an outcry in the press and public concern, Mussolini began a governmental crackdown at the beginning of 1925.

Likewise, Hitler used the convenient emergency of the Reichstag Fire in 1933 to ban the Communist Party in Germany before granting himself the power to make laws without Reichstag involvement. Franco had already essentially created a one-party state with his consolidating all nationalist parties into one but upon declaring victory, making all other political opposition and trade unions illegal.

Stalin was already operating within a one-party system so his destruction of opposition was not of alternative political parties, but alternative leaders and figures within the party itself. The key figure of his campaign was Leon Trotsky, who was removed from his governmental post and in his position as the head of the Red Army, being found guilty of being a counter revolutionary and exiled in 1928. He was later assassinated in 1940.

Use of state threats and surveillance

With political opposition removed and or destroyed, these authoritarian regimes put in place machinery to maintain control with threats and surveillance. This often took the form of militias, secret police or spy networks.

Germany very famously had both the *Sturm Abteilung* (SA) and the paramilitary *Schutzstaffel* (SS) as Nazi Party militia. The SS was conceived as the leader's personal bodyguard prior to the Second World War.

The unit within the SS which focused on the general populace was the *Gestapo*, which was established in 1933. Italy also generated a secretive spy network, which was called *Organizzazione per la Vigilanza e la Repressione dell'Antifascismo* (OVRA). Russia's equivalent was formerly known as the Cheka, but during this period was the *Naródnyy komissariát vnútreñnikh del* (NKVD). Spain had the *Brigada Político-Social* (BPS).

These organisations relied on a mix of intimidation and violence, along with the encouragement of civilian informers. Colleagues, neighbours, family members were all urged to report on those within their circle.

Monsterring or othering of established national enemy

In order to maintain this national state, it is politically expedient to generate an Other on whom to place fear and blame.

In most of the conservative right wing authoritarian regimes, this is predominantly focused on socialist or communist forces, as it was in Italy and Spain. Germany also targeted communist and socialist activists but widened their net much more extensively to the Roma, LGBT+ people, people of colour, as well as most famously and most consistently: the Jewish people.

In Russia, there was focus not just on othering those from capitalist states in the West, but also monsterring opposition from within the state itself. The term 'counter-revolutionary' could be loosely applied to anyone aligned to members of the party who were not Stalin and could easily become figures for investigation and imprisonment. It could also refer to workers and regions who had not met their often unrealistic, internally mandated quotas.

Use of state violence

Authoritarian regimes thrive off the mix of fear and support of their populace. State violence proves to be a consistently valuable tool for these regimes in maintaining control.

In Germany, the state apparatus that enabled horrific violence was expansive. From national campaigns of destruction like *Kristallnacht* designed to generate a hostile environment, to the cold efficiency of their eugenics programmes, the scale of state violence was enormous. (For more on this, please see the Eugenics and the Nazis section of this pack.)

In the Spanish Civil War, there were massacres of not just Republican forces but civilians, most famously in Guernica and Barajoz. Once Franco officially became the leader of Spain, the White Terror began. This is the name given to the campaign of brutality undertaken by Francoist forces including violent assault, rape, imprisonment or murder of those seen as against the state, including but not limited to former Republicans. By the 1940s, Franco boasted that he had approximately 26,000 political prisoners imprisoned across Spain.

In a similar period, we see the Great Terror of Stalin's rule, which includes the Purge of the Red Army, resulting in the execution of 34,000 soldiers within 18 months, as well as the public show trials, mass sentencing of Trotskyists without trial and the murderous conditions of the Gulag.

Cultural control and revisionist propaganda

The suspension of a free press is one way to achieve cultural control with propaganda. Notably, in Russia, 'socialist realism' was designated as the only Party approved genre of art and literature. Famously, Stalin also altered official Communist Party history to remove any mentions of Trotsky.

Likewise, both Italy and Germany saw the revision of textbooks for school students, along with the establishment of compulsory youth movements as a way to keep the population compliant and to indoctrinate the young. There were also flagrant displays of destruction, for example public book burnings. A notable image from 1930s in Nazi Germany was the burning of the library and research output of the Institute for Sexology in Berlin, which destroyed over 20 years of research into sexuality and gender that has never been recovered. This was accompanied by the burning of 20,000 books across Germany.

In Franco's Spain, regional languages and cultures were meant to be suppressed, including the banning of the use of Catalan and Basque outside of the home, and making it illegal to name infants with Basque or Catalan names.

Find out more

['6 May 1933: Looting Of The Institute Of Sexology'](#), Holocaust Memorial Day Trust

['Adolf Hitler'](#), ['Benito Mussolini'](#), ['Francisco Franco'](#), ['Joseph Stalin'](#), History

['Hitler's Rise to Power'](#), Facing History

['How Did Hitler Happen?'](#), The National WWII Museum New Orleans

['Internal Workings of the Soviet System'](#), Revelations from the Russian Archives from Library of Congress Archived Exhibits

['The Nazi Rise to Power'](#), ['Magnus Hirschfeld'](#), United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

['The Rise of Fascism'](#), Lumen Learning

Diavolo, Lucy, ['LGBTQ Institute in Germany Was Burned Down by Nazis'](#), Teen Vogue, 20th September 2017

Eco, Umberto, ['Ur-Fascism'](#), *The New York Review of Books*, 22nd June 1995

Einaudi, Mario, ['The rise and fall of fascism'](#), in *What Is The Future of Italy*, (American Historical Association, 1945)

Public Broadcasting Service, [The Dictator's Playbook](#)

Stock, Adam, 'Dystopia at its limits: World War II and history' in *Modern Dystopian Fiction and Political Thought* (Routledge: 2020)

Waxman, Olivia B., ['What to Know About the Origins of Fascism's Brutal Ideology'](#), *TIME*, 22nd March 2019

Climate change

The concept of climate change and its negative impacts on the human population and the natural world have become staples of dystopian fiction. While in some texts this change is brought on by man-made weaponry or mass illness, in others we see extrapolations of the effects of climate change.

The first scientists to posit carbon dioxide build up in the atmosphere generating global warming were Arrhenius and Chamberlain in the 1890s but it is not until the Sixties that climate scientists are able to measure these rises. Charles David Keeling set up studies from the late Fifties and throughout the Sixties to observe increase of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and found evidence of annual rises.

During the late Sixties and early Seventies, scientific opinion posited that climate change might result in global warming or global cooling and that in either case, this would have detrimental impacts on sea levels, plant-life and wildlife. Eventually climate scientists converged on an understanding that global warming, rather than global cooling, was the predominant climate risk of the future.

In 1979, the US National Academy of Sciences found credible evidence that doubling carbon dioxide rates would start to raise the global temperature between 1.5 and 4.5 degrees centigrade higher resulting in: polar ice cap melting, changing sea levels, mass flooding and mass drought, as well as the raising of ambient temperatures globally. Even so, it was not until 1985, where the global conference held in Villach declared a consensus on global warming and made a concerted call on governments to reconsider international agreements with regards to pollutants.

It has been revealed through recent investigative reporting that the fossil fuel industry had been aware of the impacts of their industry on the environment since the Sixties from their own in-house research. The industry did continue to fund scientific research that would explore other reasons for the increased rate of CO₂, other greenhouse gases and global warming, meaning that although consensus had largely been achieved, this was cast back into debate in the eyes of the public.

In spite of this effort to sow further debate, global warming fears became mainstream in 1988, moving beyond the scientific and the political arena towards the social and cultural landscape. The Toronto Conference of that year called for strict, specific limits on greenhouse gas emissions.

In 1995, reports are published detailing breaking Antarctic ice shelves and other signs of global warming, confirming fears that first reached consensus in the Seventies. *Parable of the Sower* very explicitly explores a vision of the United States in the 2020s from the vantage point of 1990s fears about the possible outcomes if approaches to fossil fuel emissions, greenhouse gases, and global warming were not tackled.

Throughout the early 2000s, the oil and fossil fuel lobbies, particularly in the US, downplayed climate issues despite the IPCC's 2001 report which stated that global warming was very likely to generate highly damaging impacts globally. Even until the 2010s, climate change denial was regularly platformed despite the body of scientific evidence confirming not just the reality of climate change but its increasing pace.

It is really in the last fifteen years or so that there has been a profound and radical change in the social discussion around climate change, if not always mirrored in the political and economic spheres. Much eco-dystopia wrestles with visions of unchecked climate change as a way of examining the imbalance between human consumption and resources needed to sustain this consumption. As with the nuclear threat of the Sixties, climate endangerment has become a dominating concern in twenty-first century dystopian fiction whether as a central theme or a key part of dystopian world-building.

Find out more

[Timeline](#), New Scientist

Parsons, Paul, '[A brief history of climate change warnings](#)', History Extra, 3rd December 2018

Watts, Jonathan Watts; Blight, Garry; McMullan, Lydia; Gutiérrez, Pablo, '[Half a century of dither and denial – a climate crisis timeline](#)', *The Guardian*, 9th October 2019

Zillman, John W., '[A History of Climate Activities](#)', World Meteorological Organization Bulletin Vol. 58 Issue 3, 2009

Thematic context questions

Below we've provided a series of questions you can use to help students in engaging with thematic context of the topic. These can be particularly useful when analysing unseen extracts but are questions they can ask about any passage or text studied in the *Dystopia* topic.

<p>What is the narrative perspective?</p>	<p>Who has power in this text? What kind of power? (institutional, interpersonal, political etc.)</p>
<p>Who is the protagonist, if there is one? Do they seem a stand in for the 'ordinary person'?</p>	<p>How do the central characters seem to respond to events? Are they passive or do they seek solutions?</p>
<p>What problems (social, political, economic etc.) can you see in the text? Are they caused by a hostile force, by an accident or an uncontrollable event?</p>	<p>How is the setting described? Is it particularly bleak or strange, familiar or unfamiliar?</p>
<p>If there appears to have been a catastrophic event, does it appear to be accidental or man-made?</p>	<p>What social issues are presented in the passage? How does the author engage with gender, race and/or class?</p>
<p>How does the passage present violence and control? Is it explicit, threatened or implied? What kind of violence or control is on display (e.g. physical, emotional, political, sexual)?</p>	<p>Does this passage present witnessing or watching? Who is watching and who is being watched?</p>
<p>How might the date of publication relate to events in the passage or its setting?</p>	

Biographical context

Biographical context can be useful in drawing together different areas of knowledge but we do offer a general warning about applying this in too broad a manner. Reading fictional work primarily through a biographical lens can often flatten nuance and can create distortions of authorial experience to fit the fictional narrative. We particularly offer caution regarding mistaking work as necessarily autobiographical or confessional (female writers tend to be particularly targeted with this approach).

The two core authors of this topic are George Orwell and Margaret Atwood. Below we've offered a brief biography and links to sources about both authors.

George Orwell (1903-1950)

George Orwell was born in 1903 in British India into an upper middle class family. He won a scholarship to Eton, where he was briefly taught French by Aldous Huxley. Orwell, whose real name was Eric Blair, did not excel academically at Eton and as his parents could not afford to send him to university without a scholarship, decided in 1922 that he should join the Indian Imperial Police in Burma. He resigned from this position in 1927 to become a writer.

Orwell's interest in the lives of the poor led him to carry out research by living in extreme poverty for periods of time himself, which led to his 1933 publication *Down and Out in Paris and London* adopting the pseudonym George Orwell. He continued as a writer, also supporting himself by teaching and then by working in a bookshop. Further research among the poor in the north of England led to the publication in 1937 of *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Orwell married Eileen O'Shaughnessy in 1936, then went to Spain to fight against Franco in the Spanish Civil War. Disillusioned and wounded, he returned to England in May 1937, writing about his experiences in *Homage to Catalonia*.

During the Second World War, when his health allowed, he worked for the BBC and continued writing, having *Animal Farm* completed in 1944, but publication was delayed because the character Napoleon would very likely be taken as a satirical portrait of the Allied Leader Josef Stalin. In September of that year the Orwells adopted a baby, but Eileen died suddenly in 1945. In the next five years, Orwell suffered with poor health. He spent some time on the Island of Jura in the Inner Hebrides; he continued writing, now working on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and he married Sonia Brownell. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published in June 1949, and Orwell died in London the following January at the age of 46.

Letter by and documentary on Orwell

Orwell's [letter to Noel Willmet](#) on his reasons for writing *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, 18th May 1944

[The Real George Orwell](#) features radio pieces drawn from the BBC Archives

Margaret Atwood (1939-)

Born in 1939 in Canada to a forest entomologist father and a dietician and nutritionist mother. She spent much of her childhood in the backwoods of northern Quebec, and did not attend school full time until the age of 12, allowing plenty of time for reading. She studied for her first degree in English (minoring in Philosophy and French) in Toronto, and completed a master's degree at Harvard. Atwood gained her first university teaching post in 1964 and continued to work as an academic until the late 1980s; during this period she was also publishing creative work, mostly poetry.

As a writer, she is best known for her novels. The first, *The Edible Woman* (1969), is a campus novel which is generally seen as a feminist work. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), her sixth novel, brought substantial recognition including a Booker Prize nomination. The nineties saw more success with *The Robber Bride* and *Alias Grace*, and Atwood finally won the Booker with *The Blind Assassin* in 2000. The succeeding decade saw work on the Maddaddam Trilogy, finally completed in 2013; in 2019, she won the Booker again with *The Testaments*, the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood is also a poet and essayist.

Interviews with and essays by Atwood

Atwood's collection of essays *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002) is a good place to gather a sense of Atwood's perspective on her background and writing career.

Atwood, Margaret, ['The Road to Utopia'](#) *The Guardian*, 14th October 2011

Suggested authors: biographical pointers

As some of these authors are still living, or were living during the latter half of the twentieth century, please find below a range of interviews and profiles on the suggested authors on this list:

H. G. Wells (1866-1946)

- Cole, Sarah, *Inventing Tomorrow: H.G. Wells and the Twentieth Century*, (Columbia University Press, 2019)
- Wells, H.G. ["It seems to me that I am more to the Left than you, Mr Stalin" Interview with Stalin](#), *The New Statesman*, 27th October 1934 (also [archived by Internet Archive](#))

Aldous Huxley (1894-1963)

- Wallace, Mike, ['Interview with Aldous Huxley'](#), 18th May 1958 (video and transcript available at link)
- Wickes, George and Fraser, Raymond, ['Aldous Huxley, The Art of Fiction No. 24'](#), *The Paris Review*, Issue 23, Spring 1960

Ray Bradbury (1920-2012)

- Jonas, Gerald, ['Ray Bradbury, Who Brought Mars to Earth With a Lyrical Mastery, Dies at 91'](#), *The New York Times*, 6th June 2012
- Weller, Sam, ['Ray Bradbury, The Art of Fiction No. 203'](#), *The Paris Review*, Issue 192, Spring 2010

J. G. Ballard (1930-2009)

- Frick, Thomas, ['J. G. Ballard, The Art of Fiction, No. 85'](#), *The Paris Review*, Issue 94, Winter 1984
- McNay, Michael, ['JG Ballard: "science fiction celebrates the possibilities of life"'](#), *The Guardian*, 11th September 1970 (republished online 11th September 2020)

Anthony Burgess (1917-1993)

- Burgess, Anthony, and Coale, Samuel. ["An Interview With Anthony Burgess."](#) *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, (Autumn 1981), pp. 429–52
- Cullinan, John, ['Anthony Burgess, The Art of Fiction No. 48'](#), *The Paris Review*, Issue 56, Spring 1973

Doris Lessing (1919-2013)

- Many of [Lessing's interviews are collated](#) on DorisLessing.org
- Lessing wrote a two volume autobiography, ['Under My Skin 1919 – 1949'](#) (HarperCollins, 1994) and ['Walking in the Shade 1949 – 1962'](#) (HarperCollins, 1997)

P. D. James (1920-2014)

- Dalley, Jan, ['Interview: Mistress of morality tales: P D James: Jan Dalley meets the celebrated crime writer whose latest novel examines evil from a very different perspective'](#), *The Independent*, 19th September 1992
- Guppy, Shusha, ['P.D. James, The Art of Fiction No. 141'](#), *The Paris Review*, Issue 135, Summer 1995

Octavia Butler (1947-2006)

- Butler, Octavia E., [“Devil Girl From Mars”: Why I Write Science Fiction](#)’ speech from Media in Transition Conference, February 1998 (transcript available at link)
- Potts, Stephen W., [‘We Keep Playing the Same Record’: A Conversation with Octavia E. Butler](#)’, *Science-Fiction Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 70, November 1996, pp. 331–38

Cormac McCarthy (1933-)

- Adams, Tim, [‘Cormac McCarthy: America’s great poetic visionary](#)’, *The Observer*, 20th December 2009
- Jurgensen, John, [‘Hollywood’s Favorite Cowboy](#)’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 20th November 2009

Further sources

- Amis, Kingsley, [New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction](#), (Harcourt Brace, 1960)
- Atwood, Margaret, [In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination](#), (Anchor Brooks, 2011)
- Baker, Robert S., *Brave New World: History, Science and Dystopia*, (Twayne Publishers, 1989)
- Bergonzi, Bernard, *The Early H.G. Wells: A Study of the Scientific Romances*, (University of Toronto Press, 1961)
- Carey, John, ed., *The Faber Book of Utopias*, (Faber & Faber, 2000)
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- ed. Claeys, Gregory, *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, (Cambridge University Press, 2010)
- Cunningham, Valentine, *British Writers of the Thirties*, (Oxford University Press, 1989)
- Huxley, Aldous, [Brave New World Revisited](#), (Chatto & Windus, 1959)
- Kunkel, Benjamin, '[Dystopia and the End of Politics](#)', *Dissent Magazine*, Fall 2008
- Lepore, Jill, '[A Golden Age for Dystopian Fiction](#)', *The New Yorker*, 29th May 2017
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- ed. Sheidlower, Jesse, Historical Dictionary of Science Fiction
[Speculative fiction](#)
[Subject: Dystopia](#)

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