Young Adult Dystopian Literature

Kelly A. Sporrer

Sonoma State University: EDUC 571 – Dr. Paula Lane

**Introduction**

The examination of the trends and influences of young adult (YA) dystopian literature require that we look at both elements (young adult literature and dystopian literature) individually in order to make sense of their combined power. The growing trend in YA dystopian literature is quite evident; their presence on book shelves and in their big screen adaptations cannot be overlooked. The opening weekend of the Hunger Games movie saw box office sales in excess of $155 million in just three days; the third best opening weekend of all time (Gann & Gavigan, 2012). As an 8th grade teacher who is bombarded with requests for these types of novels, I began to wonder, what was the draw to this genre, and could my 8th graders could indeed make the connections with the social commentaries that are at the center of dystopian themes? I chose the medium of small group literature circles, response essays, and student surveys to conduct my examination of this growing trend in YA dystopian literature.

Dystopian literature novels are the present day equivalent of fables, “cautionary tales” about modern society. Dystopia, a term that literally translates to “bad utopia,” encompasses novels that reflect on problems seen in current societies. In essence, YA dystopian novels are classic Hero’s Journeys, wherein, the protagonist’s ultimate boon is to save the society that has been destroyed by the prior generations, in particular irresponsible adults (and mainly controlling politicians). In contrast to utopian novels, which are indicative of “any idealized place, state, or situation of perfection” (Guralnik, 1972, p. 1565), dystopian novels present problematic situations that are prevalent in our current culture, which are then exaggerated to the extreme of the worst case scenario. This method is very effective at heightening the awareness of the potential dangers that could arise if society continues down the chosen path.

**Literature Review**

**What is YA Dystopian Literature and How Does It Differ from Children’s Lterature?** According to Wehmeyer, children receive messages from many sources including the written word (1979). It is understood that children are less able than adults to evaluate the accuracy and nuances of communication, and therefore, they are more subject to the influence of the printed word than adults are. Patty Campbell, author of “The Sand in the Oyster; So What Really Happened?” also points out that “as young adult literature grows stylistically fancier and fancier, the qualities of ambivalence and ambiguity, as well as the related consequence of the unresolved ending, appear more and more frequently” (Campbell, 2005). With this change and increased complexity, there is definitely a change at the forefront of YA literature.

Additionally, authors and publishers act as gatekeepers of that written communication. With our youth being more connected than ever before, they are the perfect target consumer for authors and publishers to relay their messages through the written word. How does YA literature differ from Children’s literature? As Roberta Trites, author of *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (2004) would say, “Children’s literature often affirms the child’s sense of Self, and his or her personal sense of power” (p. 6). This type of literature supports a child’s sense of security and place, which is often centered on family and home. YA literature, however, takes a drastic turn when our adolescents begin to interact in society. Hence, we enter the world of young adult (YA) dystopian literature. Trites continues, describing the transformation into YA dystopian literature:

In the adolescent novel, protagonists must learn about the social forces that have made them what they are. They learn to negotiate the levels of powers that exist in the myriad of social institutions within which they must function, including family; school; the church; government; social constructions of sexuality, gender, race, class, and cultural mores surrounding death (p. 6).

With the transition to “novels told from multiple perspectives, readers are no longer beholden to an authoritarian, didactic narrator” (Nikolajeva, 1998). Differing versions of the plot unfold and blur together, challenging the reader to consider multiple perspectives and from whose perspective the events of that story are revealed (Serafini, 2012). Dystopian literature acts as a counter to earlier fictionalized utopias in that dystopian fiction “satirizes utopian ideals or describes societies where negative social forces have supremacy” (Scholes & Ostenson, 2013). A government that is out of control is often the focus of these utopias. “A major premise of classic dystopian works is that humanity is the cause of its own nightmarish situation…government, technology, commercialization – society as a whole is to blame because of incompetence, consent, or complacency” (Scholes & Ostenson, 2013).

Although there are a multitude of differentiations in dystopian literature, there are some major commonalities. Some may take place on other planets or in a different version of Earth’s future, but all “portray a vaguely recognizable condition, a condition we are likely to arrive at if we don’t change our ways. Environmental disaster, political apocalypse, technological obsession, social tyranny, whatever the problem, these books separate these problems from the present so that young readers can recognize and process them without distraction” (Serafini, 2012).

Dystopian literature may also be referred to as a section of cult fiction. “Subjects

often cover lurid topics such as sex and drugs, or will include criticism of the establishment through exploration of the human condition or creation of dystopian societies” (Fann, 2011). According to Fann, cult fiction inspires, amuses, and amazes their readers by stirring emotions and evoking passion.

**Recent Changes in YA Literature and the Teacher’s Role In Adjusting to the Growth In the Dystopian Literature Trend**

Linda Gann and Karen Gavigan, co-authors of “The Other Side of Dark: Is it Really the End of the World? Examining the Nature of Young Adult Dystopian Literature” explain that, “while dystopian literature is not a new area of literature in general, its appearance in YA literature is more recent” (2012). A review of the Young Adult Library Services Association (YASLA) awards and other lists from 2000-2012 shows an increasing occurrence of dystopian novels (Gann & Gavigan, 2012). The boundaries of YA literature have definitely changed in the past few years, and is evident in the “publication of more dystopic fiction, in particular dystopian novels and novel series” (Serafini, 2012). Serafini states that the “teen fascination with the dystopian novel would seem to be a phenomenon of the new millennium and has been frighteningly accurate in its predictions so far. The controversial topics and more elaborate design features contained in contemporary children’s literature align more with mainstream literature” (Serafini, 2012). This trend has expanded to dystopian fiction, which is having “widespread implications for literacy instruction in elementary and middle schools” (Serafini, 2012). Scholes and Ostenson, authors of “Understanding the Appeal of Dystopian Young Adult Fiction,” would agree that “dystopian fiction seems to have found a home in the growing body of young adult literature” (2013).

The recent growth of this trend challenges teachers to “become more sophisticated readers of contemporary novels if they are to expand their pedagogical approaches and classroom resources” (Serafini, 2012). The novels of students in this generation are not the same as the ones teachers encountered during their schooling experience. They are more complicated and “require new strategies and approaches to make sense of these ensembles” (Serafini, 2011). Based on Scholes and Ostenson’s experience and analysis in secondary schools, they see dystopian “themes as having a certain appeal to teenagers and also offer a wealth of material for classroom study” (Scholes and Osenson, 2013). “Teachers need to facilitate students in their personal engagement with dystopian fiction rather than attempt to employ what has been called the IRE (Initiate, Respond, Evaluate) method of classroom literature study so commonly applied to books read by a whole class” (Serafini, 2012). Through dystopian literature, teachers need to allow students to evaluate, think, and defend their own judgments of a written piece and its meaning. Teachers take the role of partners in exploration of why these books strike such a familiar note within them (Serafini, 2012). Students benefit most from discussing and defending their opinions with fellow students in conversations and in writing and exploring new ideas through response logs and discussion boards. Through thoughtful reflections, discussions, and exploration of their own thinking, students are able to make the most out of their reading experience (Serafini, 2012).

Finally, according to Serafini, the most important thing when using dystopian literature in the classroom is to “place the focus on how this reading helps students to process or make meaning of their own world” (2012). The teacher’s role is then to help students process this information and how it relates to them personally and unveils various dominant themes and symbols in their own reality. With the growing sophistication of YA literature, we also see a growth of ambiguity and ambivalence within their plots and themes. It is strong within human nature to make connections and resolve any inconsistencies that we encounter. This is also true when things don’t seem quite right within a novel. “YA novels with a high degree of ambiguity and ambivalence, especially those that are without closure, are so beloved by teachers. With their built-in need for resolution, they are irresistible for discussion and essay assignments” (Campbell, 2005).

In his article, “Howard Zinn and Teaching Against Dystopia,” Prentice Chandler examines the controversy of teaching dystopia in an academic setting.

The simple act of questioning the unquestionable is a profound thing in an educational atmosphere that reifies (sp.) the measureable, the taken for granted, and the traditional. And, as Zinn points out, educating the mind for obedience and conformity is dangerous for the sustainability of a democracy (2010).

For Chandler, the study of Zinn’s philosophy sets the stage for challenging the teaching of dystopian themes, but rather turning toward the study of humanity and to seek the truth for a more just society. This pedagogy interrupts the underlying presuppositions of what it means to be a leader and what it means to be led. When students begin to question the motives of our leaders, when they are able to cut through the rhetoric and see the net result of the actions of our elected (and appointed) leaders, our democracy becomes stronger. When students can grasp that it is their duty to question their leaders, they begin to question all aspects of what they are taught (Chandler, 2010). Oftentimes we, as teachers cringe when we hear the question, “Why do we have to learn this?” I believe that this is a normal and even healthy question to ask in a critically thinking classroom. This question is one step away from asking really important questions about the power of who decides curriculum in our schools (Chandler, 2010).

**Teenagers as a primary target audience**

When teen readers are ready to transition from young adult novels to adult novels, they are often “looking for something gritty, edgy and that won’t turn him completely off from adult titles” (Fann, 2011). Explicit and controversial titles are often attractive to teen readers which address difficult subjects that face today’s teens. Many of these titles also find themselves on the American Library Association’s Banned Book List, which adds to the appeal (Fann, 2011). Scholes and Ostenson would concur that “dystopian novels that wrestle with deeper societal and moral issues are often well received by young minds that are developing the ability and even willingness to grapple with complex ideas” (2013).

Physiologically, teenagers are beginning to question authority and are making the shift from being dependent children to independent adults. As Trites confirms, “Teenagers, who are beginning to question authority but are still contained by it, are the obvious choice for protagonists” (p. 16). “The issues protagonists face can’t help but resonate with young readers as advancements in technology and current political events have followed” authors’ predictions with shocking accuracy (Serafini, 2012). Bullen and Parsons, authors of “Dystopian Visions of Global Capitalism: Philip Reeve’s Mortal Engines and M.T Anderson’s Feed” agree that it is the “prevailing need for people, in this case children, to learn to devise positive and flexible life stories in ways that are responsive to and resilient in the face of a social world which is no longer secure or predictable (Bullen & Parsons, 2007). They conclude by saying, “If children are to be resilient and adaptable citizens in the face of an uncertain and unpredictable future in risk society, they need to be able to view it critically” (Bullen & Parsons, 2007). Following that same line of thinking, Scholes and Ostenson reiterate that “dystopian novels that wrestle with deeper societal and moral issues are often well received by young minds that are developing the ability and even willingness to grapple with complex ideas” (2013).

Although teenagers are keen to see themselves as victims of their future, the attraction may also be that they are given the attention which they so desire. What really resonates with them is the overarching question that relates to teens, “’Where do I fit into a world gone wrong?’” (Serafini, 2012). According to Fann, who would agree with Serafini, dystopian novels will stroke the egos of their teen readers. “The reader identifies with the alienated hero, and ‘rejoices’ in what he/she sees” (Fann, 2011). The rejection that teens often feel make a real connection between them and dystopian protagonists. Once that connection between the alienated hero emerges, the reader’s outlook on life and his/her world view will begin to take place. Dystopian fans will ardently debate their favorite titles and what they believe the author to be conveying to their teen audience (Fann, 2011). It is this status, which is based on the reception of its readers that sets the cult fiction genre apart from other genres.

**The ultimate vision of hope**

In her article, “Shining the Light on Dystopian Young Adult Literature,” author Diane Colson sees the difference between adult dystopian literature and YA dystopian literature as the concluding vision of hope. Although in both of these genres everything may be destroyed by the end of the book, unlike their adult counterparts, teen novels “end with a glimmer of hope… we have the courage and vision to begin anew” (Colson, 2012). Gann and Gavigan would agree that the most notable difference between YA and adult dystopian fiction is “the fact that the YA titles have more hopeful endings….the adult versions, however, are doomed to defeat” (2012). Because the protagonists of YA dystopian literature are indeed teenagers themselves, they are incredibly intriguing and identifiable to their adolescent followers. By the end of the novel, “there is an uplifting sense of triumph when young people defy all of the obstructions of a repressive society and emerge whole, with a new sense of power” (Colson, 2012).

In the dystopian context, adolescents “come to see themselves as agents, individuals with a will (often in sharp contrast to the will of the society) and with the capacity to not only disagree with prevailing opinions but to act against them” (Scholes & Ostenson, 2013). The sense of a hopeful future is what keeps our youth reading. This message is eloquently expressed in Bradbury’s timeless novel. “That's the wonderful thing about man; he never gets so discouraged or disgusted that he gives up doing it all over again, because he knows very well it is important and WORTH the doing” (Bradbury, 1953, p. 153).

One children’s editor, Jean Karl, 1970, notes this hopeful characteristic. Children’s books depart radically from adult books because of the element of hope even in the most disastrous circumstances. Children maintain that the future is inherited and therefore when hope is gone, childhood is gone. Children’s writers and children’s editors share a common dedication to hope (Wehmeyer, 1979).

In their article, “Why So Grim?” authors Brown and DiMarzo argue that the exposure of teens to gritty topics is not a new one, but rather one that has shaken the YA market since the 60’s (1998). They also shed some light on the topic of hope offering two opposing views; one that presents an obligation to offer hope and not the happily-ever-after ending, and another that “teens are much more able to handle painful subjects and open-ended conclusions than other readers” (Brown & DiMarzo, 1988). In middle school, there is a preference of a neatly concluded story, whereas in high school, students seem more intrigued by ambiguity (Brown & DiMarzo, 1998). There is, however, a consensus in this article that mimics the claims of Colson, in that teenagers relate to and enjoy reading about people who “swim against the current,” those non-conformists who fight against prejudice and for justice (Brown & DiMarzo, 1988).

**Dystopian novels as a commentary on social, political, and economic structures, and the prevalent ties to Postmodernism**

Arguably, YA dystopian literature is a direct product of postmodernism. Roberta Trites succinctly breaks down the stages of literature into three eras: Romanticism, Modernism, and Postmodernism. Romanticism is where “society is legitimized”; Modernism shifts the focus to individuals; and finally, Postmodernism begins to question how the government and society interact with their individuals. Trite claims that dystopian literature came out of the Modern era; young adult literature came out of the Romantic era; and young adult dystopian literature is the combined product occurring in the Postmodern era. (Trites, p. 17). In fact, Trites believes that without postmodernism, YA dystopian literature would not exist.

For adolescents, the focus is certainly the future. Students who are studying utopian and dystopian novels are grappling with the questions of “what we want, what we can change, what we must fight, and what we must endure to be ready for the future” (Ridley, 1983). Ridley, who uses the study of dystopian novels in her own classroom, challenges her students to answer some of the key questions sparked by the genre. “What elements in our own society frightened the author? Is his or her view correct? If these elements are allowed to grow unchecked, could we have the society portrayed on one of these novels?” (Ridley, 1983)

With the rapid growth of social media and internet connectedness, dystopian fiction reveals a world that has “gone radically astray at some point in the future, as authors extrapolate on current social, political, or economic trends” (Serafini, 2012). These novels reflect on a future that many teenagers see as a real one that is nearly upon them and plays out their worst fears (Serafini, 2012). Gann and Gavigan reiterate that “typically, themes throughout YA dystopian literature are based on the idea of a bleak, oppressive, and controlled future – for example, dystopian novels for adolescents often warn about the dangers of a current trend or political issue in an alternative society” (2012). This can be seen through the tremendous rise in consumerism and corporate influence of the internet, the bombardment of advertising and unsolicited information, with the additional element of corporations “controlling education in the future, where students are mostly indoctrinated into how to be more effective consumers rather than learning about history, science, math, or literature” (Serafini, 2012).

The uneven distribution of power is at the core of all conflicts that arise within dystopian societies. To Trites, this is the key to adolescent literature. Teenagers “must learn to balance their power with their parents’ power and with the power of other authority figures in their lives” (Trites, p. iv). In Suzanne Collins’s Hunger Games there is a distinct separation of power between the rich and the poor. The balance is so askew, that the government is willing to sacrifice its young to continue to hold that power. The citizens’ lack of power allow this barbaric tradition to continue from generation to generation. However, “without experiencing the gradations between power and powerlessness, the adolescent cannot grow. Thus, power is even more fundamental to adolescent literature than growth” (Trites, p. iv).

In a telling interview with Bill Moyers on Moyers and Co., renowned postmodernist and philosopher, Henry Giroux argues that “all things that make democracy viable are in crisis” (Moyers & Co., 2013) In fact, it is that forecast of impending doom that is the driving force behind dystopian literature. According to Giroux, “America is descending into madness” (Moyers & Co, 2013). Through this hyperbole, Giroux explains that in all exaggeration, there is truth. This is precisely the crux of YA dystopian literature; it is a world that is experiencing the extremes of what could be the manifestation of current social, political, and economic realities. According to Joshua Garrison, this manifestation is not confined to either parties on the Left or Right; both employ dystopian imagery. “Nor is the hyperbole limited to rambunctious activists, demagogic politicians, television talk show hosts, or radio ‘shock jocks’ in quest of ever bigger ratings (Garrison, 2011). One example of this commentary can be seen through the incredibly popular Hunger Games series. The protagonist, teenager Katniss Everdeen, is waging her own personal war against twenty-three other contestants in a battlefield which is then broadcast to 100% of the citizens of Panem. This provides entertainment reminiscent of Roman gladiators but ultimately touts that the government, The Capitol, has complete power over the lives and deaths of their citizens (Serafini, 2012).

Within the field of education, even critical scholars have begun to utilize dystopian metephors in their writings” (Garrison, 2011). Garrison, like Giroux, believes that contemporary society is indeed dystopian because “media, politics, and education teach that there are no alternatives to a world governed by markets and corporations; consequently, democracy is experiencing its ‘death’ as America enters a phase of ‘authoritarian’ and ‘proto-facist’ politics” (Garrison, 2011). Garrison continues by expressing that since schools are conceived of this society, they are “represented as institutions similar to those found in the fictional pages of numerous dystopian novels” (Garrison, 2011).

David Smith and Edward Polloway explore another institution involving disability and healthcare in today’s society. A central question in their article is whether “there is a human and inclusive place for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in human society” (2013). The reality of genetic manipulation, parental choice and responsibility, and disability (both intellectual and physical), are at the crux of a broader question of individual diversity and value in society. As the political debates in the United States in this decade concerning health care and who deserves it intensify, decisions about the worth of the people who have disabilities must in our view be a focus of our field’s engagement in both the science of and advocacy for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities” (Smith & Polloway, 2013). This reflection of human value and societal contribution as seen in Smith and Polloway’s article is indeed the stuff of which dystopian novels are written and reflected upon.

**Bibliography**

Bradbury, Ray. (1953). *Fahrenheit 451*. The Random House Publishing Group. New York

Brown, J. M. & DiMarzo, C. (1998). Why so grim? *Publishers Weekly*. p. 120-123.

Bullen, E. & Parsons, E. (2007). Dystopian visions of global capitalism: Phillip Reeve’s mortal engines and M.T. Anderson’s feed. *Children’s Literature in Education*. 38 (2), p. 127-139.

Campbell, P. (2005). The sand in the oyster: what really happened? *The Horn Book Magazine*.

July/August, p. 504-507.

Chandler, P. (2010). Howard Zinn and teaching against dystopia. *Ohio Social Studies Review*. 46 (2), p.

3-6.

Colson, D. (12, November 2012). Shining the light on dystopian young adult literature. *Yasla The Hub*. Retrieved from http://www.yasla.ala.org/thehub/2012/11/12/shing -the-light-on-dystopian- young-adult-literature.

Fann, K. (2011). Tapping into the appeal of cult fiction. *Reference and Users Services Quarterly*. 51 (1),

p. 15-18.

Gann, L. & Gavigan, K. (2012). The other side of dark. *Voice of Young Advocates*. 35 (3), p234-238.

Garrison, J. (2011). Growing up dystopian. *American Education History Journal*. 38 (1/2), p. 55-73.

Kim, Gina (Producer). (2013, November 22). Moyers and Company. *Henry Giroux on Zombie*

*Politics*. Retrieved from <http://billmoyers.com/segment/henry-giroux-on-zombie-politics/>

Nikolajeva, M. (1998). Exit children’s literature? *The Lion and the Unicorn*. 22 (2), p. 221-236.

Ridley, O. (1983). The future in the classroom today. *The English Journal*. 72 (6), p. 67-68

Scholes, J. & Ostenson, J. (2013). Understanding the appeal of dystopia, young adult fiction. *ALAN Review*. 40 (2), p. 11-20.

Serafini, F. & Blasingame, J. (2012). The changing face of the novel. *Reading Teacher*. 66(2), p. 145-148.

Smith, J. & Polloway, E. (2013). Intellectual disabilities and dystopian visions: Ayn Rand and Edgar Rice

Burroughs. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities.* 51 (3), p. 201-205.

Trites, R. (2004). Disturbing the universe: power and repression in young adult literature. *University of Iowa Press*.

Wehmeyer, L. (1979). Futuristic children’s novels as a mode of communication*. Research in the*

*Teaching of English*. 13 (2), p. 137-152