Themes in Dystopian Fiction

Relating common elements in YA fantasy to current events
A Quick Intro

I write fiction under the pen name M.D. Massey. I’m the author of the Scratch Sullivan post-apocalyptic paranormal series (*THEM*), and the Colin McCool new adult urban fantasy series (*Junkyard Druid*).

In my secret identity, I’m a business consultant.

Fun fact: I taught martial arts professionally for two decades, and worked with kids and teens on a daily basis for much of that time.

My hobbies are lurking the Teen and YA fiction section at Barnes and Noble without looking like a creeper, and avoiding political arguments on Facebook.
What is Dystopian Fiction?

**Dystopia:** “An imaginary place where people lead dehumanized and often fearful lives.”

**Dystopian fiction** is a subgenre of science fiction and fantasy that transports readers into a world or worlds where modern social and political issues are distorted to the point of complete societal oppression.
Popular Contemporary Dystopian Fiction Novels

The Hunger Games trilogy by Suzanne Collins

Ready Player One by Ernest Cline

The Red Rising trilogy by Pierce Brown

The Fifth Wave by Rick Yancey

The Girl With All The Gifts by M.R. Carey

The Divergent series by Veronica Roth
What Has Driven The Rise of Dystopian Fiction?

The genre itself has been around for quite a while; Huxley (*Brave New World*), Orwell (*1984*), and Bradbury (*Fahrenheit 451*) are considered to be the progenitors of the dystopian novel.

However, it wasn’t until after the events of 9/11 that the genre experienced a surge in popularity, eventually spiking with the publication and popularity of *The Hunger Games*.

Historically, uncertainty and fear have led to increased societal interest in entertainment and culture. Yet, historical trends don’t necessarily explain why teens are so fascinated by stories in this genre.
Why Teens Enjoy Dystopian Fiction

Dystopian fiction deals with many issues teens face. Isolation, conformity, authority, and surveillance are all themes that are familiar to teenagers.

Dystopian fiction provides teens with likable antagonists facing challenges that parallel the same issues they face.

Moreover, many teens seek certainty in an uncertain world. While it may seem counterintuitive that teens should look to dystopian fiction for an escape, the genre tends to provide readers with a world that is easily understood, situations that are familiar, and protagonists that are highly relatable.
Common Themes in Dystopian Fiction

Certain tropes and themes abound in this genre, including:

- Good vs. Evil
- Totalitarianism
- Lifestyle Disparities
- Disinformation
- Hopelessness
- Rebellion
- Escape and Rebirth
The Struggle Between Good and Evil

Typically it’s very easy to see who the “good guys” and “bad guys” are in dystopian fiction. This of course stands in stark contrast to the real world, and is perhaps what makes dystopian fiction so attractive to young readers.

Often overlooked in the genre, there are few better examples of totalitarian oppression and “good vs. evil” in modern fiction than Star Wars.

Suggested Discussion Questions: What are contemporary examples of “good vs. evil” in society? Aren’t the moral characterizations of each side subjective to the beliefs of the opposition? When both sides believe they are the “good” side, what really delineates good and evil in society?
Oppressive Totalitarian Governments

Totalitarianism is defined by Webster as “centralized control by an autocratic authority” and “the political concept that the citizen should be totally subject to an absolute state authority.” Thus, it’s easy to see why teens identify with protagonists in dystopian fiction.

The political system in *The Hunger Games* is one example.

Suggested Discussion Questions: What are some examples of totalitarian governments in the last century? What beliefs led to the creation of those governments? How did those beliefs lead to the eventual downfall of those political systems?
Lifestyle Disparities and Poverty

Class conflict often exists in dystopian fiction, usually due to marked disparities in resource distribution and wealth between the ruling class and citizenry. Life in dystopian societies and worlds is often a struggle, at least for those in the common class.

Again, *The Hunger Games* provides a great example of this theme.

Suggested Discussion Questions: What policies caused lifestyle disparities to appear under totalitarian governments in recent history? What social and economic forces serve to create poverty in our society? What solutions would you propose to end poverty? How might your policies lead to totalitarianism?
Welcome to the Department of Disinformation

“Intentionally false or misleading information that is spread in a calculated way to deceive target audiences.” Not to be confused with “misinformation” which is the *unintentional* sharing of false information. But remember that IF Propaganda exists THEN Disinformation AND Misinformation also exist.

*The Maze Runner* offers a great example of protagonists who are harmed and controlled by a disinformation campaign.

Suggested Discussion Questions: What are some examples of disinformation in today’s society? How has the digital revolution impacted the use of disinformation? Does technology make it easier or harder to fool the public?
Hopelessness

In dystopian fiction, members of the oppressed class typically feel hopeless and powerless to alter their future or improve their lives. In fact, acceptance of a harsh reality is often the status quo among the oppressed class. This is sometimes used as a plot device to set up conflict between the protagonist and various supporting characters.

In *Divergent*, citizens are expected to conform to one of the five factions, and few people question the wisdom or necessity of this practice.

Suggested Discussion Questions: How does poverty lead to hopelessness? What tools can be used to provide disadvantaged persons with hope?
First Comes Realization, Then Comes Rebellion

In most dystopian novels, a shocking disclosure of information will lead the protagonist to a moral, philosophic, or political epiphany. Then comes:

- **Rebellion** - In dystopian fiction, the protagonists often take up a fight against a totalitarian government.
- **Emancipation** - The rebellion will eventually succeed in freeing at least some of the oppressed class from the bonds of tyranny.

Suggested discussion questions: Give an example of a recent disclosure of information that led to a “rebellion.” Do you think society would have been better off had that revelation never occurred?
Happily Ever After? Escape and Rebirth...

From the ashes of war, a new utopian society emerges. Or, those in the rebellion who survive the conflict then escape to an existing edenic destination where they can lead lives free from tyranny.

Sometimes this escape is more economic than geographical, as in *Ready Player One*. Also, *Star Trek* is one fictional example of a utopian society that at least nominally rises from the ashes of war.

Suggested discussion questions: What are real life examples of people in oppressive societies escaping to freedom? If you had the opportunity and means to create a new utopian society, what would it look like?
Citations and Resources

