



Historicizing Maps of Hell:  
An Examination of Historical Contexts  
in Dystopian Literature

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### **Abstract**

This thesis is an examination of the historical contexts behind eight twentieth-century dystopian novels and one dystopian film derived from one of those novels. Dystopian fiction is inextricably linked to the context (that is to say, the time and place, as well as the circumstances of its author) in which it was written. A judicious reading of a piece of dystopian literature must include an examination of this context, since dystopian works are written by at particular historical moments and have particular messages that are being sent to particular audiences. This thesis will examine the moments, messages, and audiences behind these novels and show how a better understanding of the work is achieved through examining the art in its own context.



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## Introduction

Dystopian literature is inextricably bound to the historical moment in which it is written. An “other place” is used as a foil against which the author’s contemporary society is judged. This “other place” is plagued with a problem which the author believes also plagues his own society. If that problem is not resolved, then the “other place” is the future that the author’s contemporaries have to look forward to. Margaret Atwood refers to this use of an “other place” as “speculative fiction” (a term invented by Robert A. Heinlein) to differentiate it from “science fiction.” Unlike science fiction, which deals with “things we can’t yet do or begin to do, talking beings we can never meet, and places we can’t go,” speculative fiction “employs the means already more or less to hand and takes place on Planet Earth” (“*Crake*” 513).

The problem inherent in dystopian literature is that it is historically bounded. Certainly, this can be said of other genres of literature, but dystopian fiction is more aware of the circumstances in which it is written. Like many other forms of satire, dystopic literature becomes more esoteric the farther it goes from the time and place in which it was written. A dystopic novel (or short story) is written in a particular place at a particular time for a purpose which speaks directly to that place and time. “Whatever its stance, target, or outcome, however, every dystopian narrative engages in an aesthetic/epistemological encounter with its historical conjuncture,” says Tom Moylan (181). A dystopian text can stand on its own, but the author’s message to the reader is not

completely understandable without some extra-textual information. Bernard Crick, in his introduction to an annotated edition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, writes of Orwell's novel that "the balance of some of its diverse themes depends heavily on a knowledge of the contemporary context" (1-2). Hence an annotated version of the book which explains oblique references that an audience in 1948 would understand, but an audience in 1984 might not. Dystopias are not written in a vacuum: they are written as responses to historical events that we can analyze in order to further our understanding of the text. "To say that art and history are 'para-worlds,' contiguous and reciprocal worlds that elucidate and supplement each other (in however indeterminate a fashion), is to trouble an ancient and persistent question, one that goes back at least as far as the Greeks," writes Donald Pearce (1). The dystopian novel is an attempt to interact with history, to recover "purposive human time, the sense that history is not something that simply happens to us, irrespective of our will and desires, but is, indeed, ours to make" (Phillips 299).

A dystopian novel – or for that matter, a utopian novel – is an attempt to reach out to the present, to *interact* with history and change its perceived course. Outside of a reading of the text itself is a reading of the author's message to the reader. The dystopic novel is *didactic* in the sense that it is a warning. Like the mariner who stops the wedding guest in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the dystopian novelist takes us aside, away from the distractions of everyday life, and illustrates for us a scenario that could easily happen to us if we are not careful. At the same time that it is a standalone piece of literature, it is "a warning to the reader that something must and, by implication, can be done in the present to avoid the future," says Robert Evans (qtd. in Moylan 181).

A dystopian novel does not only present a possible future, but it also suggests that the future is malleable. Lewis Mumford, in *In the Name of Sanity*, suggests that the goal of writers is not merely to imitate the horrors of reality (and reality is often horrific), but to attempt to change the horrors of reality and make the world a better place. The writer “is still a maker, a creator, not merely a recorder of fact, but above all an interpreter of possibilities. His intuitions of the future may still give body to a better world and help start our civilization on a fresh cycle of adventure and effort” (qtd. in Phillips 299).

The technique of defamiliarization, emphasized by the Russian formalists, is critical to the dystopian genre. Defamiliarization puts contemporary social situations in new lights so that they cannot “be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable” (Booker 19). A tendency toward totalitarianism *can* be stopped. Human beings *can* triumph over the pervasiveness of technology. Authors want readers to take some sort of action to change the current course of history and prevent the future they have created from coming true, either by actively working to prevent an Oceania from coming to pass, or by encouraging readers to change their behavior or attitudes. For this reason, the genre of *utopia* (of which dystopia is part) has sometimes been classified as satire. Unlike other modes of literature, satire refers to extra-textual historical situations which, if ignored, would turn the satire into comedy or tragedy. What must be examined is what Frederic V. Bogel views as “a triangle of satire with the satirist at one point, the satiric object at another, and the reader or dramatic audience at the third” (2). Satirists presuppose the existence of audiences who agree with them, for their works are pleas to those audiences

that they must do something to change the object of attack. To those not aligned with the satirist, the satirist at least makes them aware that there is a problem with their world.

All three of these characters – the satirist, the object of attack, and the reader – exist in a particular time and place. To understand the satirist’s attack, it is necessary to understand that time and place and its circumstances. The dystopia is a very specific kind of satire that takes contemporary issues that the satirist views negatively and projects them into either a world that is the historical future of our own reality or an alternate reality altogether. Why would Jack London and Octavia Butler both choose to write capitalist dystopias even though they are separated by race, gender, and a good ninety years? What makes the circumstances of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley so different that their respective novels should be so different? These are the questions that I want to answer, for every novelist has his or her own concerns which are unique to the circumstances under which they wrote.

Many of the texts I have surveyed examine not merely the history of dystopic literature, but also the history of utopic literature, of which dystopias and anti-utopias are a subset. Prior to the twentieth century, most utopian literature was utopian: science-fiction literature showcased the potential promises of science and its ability to help humankind. Curiously, the twentieth century has been largely devoid of utopian works. The progression toward dystopia during the twentieth century reflects the history of this century: “twentieth-century literature has generally envisioned utopia as either impossible or undesirable,” writes M. Keith Booker. “Indeed, numerous works of modern literature have been suspicious not only of the *possibility* of utopia, but of its very *desirability*,

equating conventional utopias with paralysis and stagnation” (16-17). To the modern imagination, a society that is happy is one in which there is no fear, hatred, or inequality. The only way the modern imagination can reconcile the paradox of these traits and a human tendency toward all of them is to suggest that a utopia requires some totalitarian force to suppress humans’ tendency toward those very things which utopia tries to eliminate. As products of the Enlightenment, we abhor oppression, even if its ends are “good” ones that attempt to eliminate suffering.

This thesis will historicize eight dystopian novels. It will look at how visions of horrific futures change in response to their authors’ historical situations and it will, in some instances, look at how novel and film versions of a dystopian world – Philip Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) and Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982) – differ, as changes to this world depend upon historical context.

## **Dystopias of the Great War Era**

The United States prior to World War I was a veritable breeding ground of corporate corruption. Such colorful figures as Cornelius Vanderbilt, Andrew Carnegie, and John D. Rockefeller became icons of capitalism. They had hundreds of millions of dollars – billions in today's dollars – to such a degree that Rockefeller's personal assets once bailed the U.S. government out of a financial slump. Industry prior to World War I was largely unregulated; unions were broken up and union members beaten and fired. The United States was not a pretty place prior to World War I. England *after* World War I was similarly a bastion of capitalism, a place where prosperity enticed people to buy things. The mass production of products for the consumer, one of the major projects of the Industrial Revolution, had come to a head.

### **Critiques of Capitalism**

Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1907) takes capitalism to task for being socially unjust and being conscious of the fact that it is socially unjust. *The Iron Heel* is a frame story; the outer frame is some time far into the future, when a "manuscript" has been found. This manuscript – the narrative of the novel – details the events leading to a capitalist takeover of the United States and the takeover itself. The author of the manuscript is Avis Everhard, wife of the leader of the socialist resistance, Ernest Everhard (Ernest, meaning true; Everhard meaning staunch or unyielding).

Most of the events of *The Iron Heel* until the takeover of an oppressive, autocratic capitalist government called the Oligarchy mirror contemporary events. In one instance, a man named Jackson loses his arm in an industrial accident then sues the company he works for, alleging that they worked him so much that he became exhausted and inattentive. The company counter-sues and prevents him from getting any damages out of the incident. London's footnotes to *The Iron Heel* note that such an event did actually happen (47). Everhard's manuscript also makes references to court decisions allowing the capitalists to extort as much work as they wanted out of workers. This is a not-so-subtle reference to a U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Lochner v. New York*, 198 U.S. 45 (1905). In that case, the Supreme Court declared unconstitutional a New York state law limiting the working hours of bakers. The Court reasoned that a person had a right to sell as much labor as he wanted. In *The Iron Heel*, London takes the position that this ruling allowed owners to extort as much labor as they wanted from workers. Decisions like the one in *Lochner v. New York* – which favor business owners – lead London to believe that people in positions of power in the United States have been bought by capitalists:

We [the Socialists] captured the state legislature of Oregon and put through splendid protective legislation, and it was vetoed by the governor, who was a creature of the trusts. We elected a governor of Colorado, and the legislature refused to permit him to take office. Twice we have passed a national income tax, and each time the supreme court smashed it as unconstitutional. The courts are in the hands of the trusts. (87)

Capitalists come together in a conglomeration known as the Oligarchy, or alternatively, The Iron Heel, which gets its name from this image: “We will grind you revolutionaries down under our heel, and we shall walk upon your faces” (63). The various trusts (The Tobacco Trust, The Dairy Trust, The Standard Oil Trust) squeeze out smaller businesses until large corporations have control over entire industries (100). While the existence of trusts is based in fact, their takeover of entire industries is not. This Oligarchy proceeds to take over the state and become the government: “The Plutocracy has all power in its hands today. It today makes the laws, for it owns the Senate, Congress, the courts, and the state legislatures. [. . .] Today the plutocracy makes the law, and to enforce the law it has at its beck and call the police, the army, the navy, and lastly, the militia, which is you, and me, and all of us” (103). The book is filled with socialist ideology, which is unsurprising, considering that London himself was a Socialist.<sup>1</sup>

The influence of corporations in the operation of the state, however, is something that occurs early in the century and then becomes less overt due to antitrust legislation passed shortly thereafter. The influence of corporations returns at the end of the century, notably in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993), which I will discuss later, and dystopic films like *The Running Man* (Paul Michael Glaser, 1987) and *RoboCop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987).

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<sup>1</sup> Socialism here is defined as the belief that the state should control the means of production, as opposed to communism, in which the people themselves control the means of production. I use the “socialism” and not “communism” because London himself uses the word “socialist” and also because it more accurately describes Everhard’s goal of an economy that is regulated by the government (not necessarily the people themselves) in order to make life more equitable. “Capitalism” is private ownership of the means of production (*private* meaning “by a non-state entity”), and “oligarchy” is political rule by a small group of people.

Yet, there is some hope for humanity in *The Iron Heel*. The outer frame, from what can be gathered from diegetic footnotes (footnotes that exist within the world of the outer frame), as well as the Foreword, is set sometime in the twenty-seventh century. This future is actually a socialist utopia where Ernest Everhard is revered. As with Margaret Atwood's "Historical Notes" in *The Handmaid's Tale* and George Orwell's "The Principles of Newspeak" from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, London implicitly posits that the world of the Oligarchy will not always exist, and thus it is possibly be overthrown. And if it can be overthrown sometime in the future, then why can it not be overthrown in 1907, before it begins? Patrick D. Murphy refers to this technique as "pseudo-documentary framing"; it "encourages discomfoting reading and social action through implicitly or explicitly commenting on the reader's contemporary predicament" (26). The outer frame, the twenty-seventh-century world, is "the 'present' for the fictionalized reader's experience of the novel, while the narrative is located in a time which has already occurred" (31).

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) is also a critique of capitalism. In Huxley's dystopic society, Henry Ford is idealized for his manufacturing processes. Everything in *Brave New World* centers around Henry Ford, from religion to architecture to time-keeping (the year in *Brave New World* is 632 A.F. – "After Ford," meaning after the introduction of the Model-T in 1908). Ford is revered so much because his assembly-line system has been used to create human beings. Low-class Deltas, Gammas, and Epsilons are created in a process that produces dozens of identical, disposable people – "the principle of mass production at last applied to biology" (7).

*Brave New World* differs from *The Iron Heel* in that in *The Iron Heel* the control of the Oligarchy is clearly not a good thing: the capitalists are out to destroy other people in their quest for power. Not so with Mustapha Mond, one of the powerful World Controllers who are in charge of *Brave New World's* society. Mond's justification for physical and mental oppression is that he is making people happy (229). Making people happy requires fulfilling their every desire and keeping free thought to a minimum. London's critique stops at industry and the proletariat. Huxley indicts the bourgeoisie for bringing such a society of complacency upon itself:

People still went on talking about truth and beauty as though they were the sovereign goods. Right up to the time of the Nine Years' War. *That* made them change their tune all right. What's the point of truth or beauty or knowledge when the anthrax bombs are popping all around you? That was when science first began to be controlled – after the Nine Years' War. People were ready to have even their appetites controlled then. Anything for a quiet life. We've gone on controlling ever since. (228)

The way Mustapha Mond tells the story, it was *the people themselves* who wanted to be repressed. They traded freedom for security, for some surety that they would never have to live again through the horror of the Nine Years' War (possibly a reference to World War I, which was, at the time, the most horrific war human beings had yet fought). This world differs markedly from later dystopias in which totalitarian regimes seize power forcefully. In Huxley's universe, the bourgeoisie asked to be relieved of the power to do evil. The result is a super-bourgeois society where people "lack individual identities,

despite the myth of individualism that informs bourgeois society. Instead, they exist principally as specimens of their class” (Booker 49).

While London and Butler talk about the horrors of the transition from the capitalist system in which they and their audiences live to hypercapitalist (meaning “beyond capitalism,” a term I use to denote capitalism which exists for its own sake, without much of a profit motive) society, Huxley’s world is fully entrenched in capitalism to the point where the only manufacturing that goes on is the manufacturing of people. To ensure that the bourgeoisie continue living their swank lifestyle, entire classes of people are manufactured who can do the jobs of supporting an economy that allows Alphas and Betas to live comfortably. The pseudo-scientific theory of Social Darwinism has become truth through the machinations of the World Controllers, who have indeed bred genetically inferior people who are fit only to do the menial tasks that alphas and betas do not want to do. Such institutions as *soma* and “feelies” provide these low-class workers (as well as upper-class workers) with creature comforts that keep them docile: “No strain on the mind or the muscles. Seven and a half hours of mild, unexhausting labour, and then the *soma* ration and games and unrestricted copulation and the feelies. What more could they ask for?” says Mustapha Mond (224). It is no coincidence that Henry Ford, the person upon whom this society is built, was himself a white supremacist. Huxley’s society is rife with racism that has become justified by the elite scientists: Deltas, Gammas, and Epsilons are smaller and dumber than Alphas and Betas because they have been manufactured that way.

All the time, however, members of all classes must *consume*. Early on in the novel, one of the lower directors explains to a group of students why they instill in Gammas, Deltas, and Epsilons a fear of nature:

Not so very long ago (a century or thereabouts), Gammas, Deltas, even Epsilons, had been conditioned to like flowers – flowers in particular and wild nature in general. The idea was to make them want to be going out into the country at every available opportunity, and so compel them to consume transport. [. . .] A love of nature keeps no factories busy. It was decided to abolish the love of nature, at any rate among the lower classes; to abolish the love of nature, but *not* the tendency to consume transport.

(22-23)

The masses exist only to consume. The elites (Alphas and Betas) exist to control the masses. This society is stagnant. People like Bernard Marx and Mustapha Mond have administrative jobs. In fact, most Alphas and Betas devote their lives to operating the society. The society itself is a static cycle of consumption and production, overseen by such figures as Bernard Marx and Mustapha Mond.

And yet, like Orwell's, Huxley's criticism is two-fold. Where Orwell indicted both Stalinism *and* fascism for their abilities to oppress, Huxley criticizes capitalism *and* socialism. He criticizes capitalism for its emphasis on mass-production and dehumanization and socialism for its ability to control. Bernard Marx's friend, Hemholtz Watson, is sent to a far-off colony for people who are *too* good at their jobs. Hemholtz Watson is a superior poet, not merely a mediocre one, and his superiority poses a threat to

the carefully controlled society that Mustapha Mond has helped create. As Mustapha tells John the Savage, a society had existed that was populated by geniuses, but this society ultimately failed because the geniuses fought amongst themselves: “The land wasn’t properly worked, there were strikes in all the factories; the laws were set at naught, orders disobeyed [. . . .] Within six years they were having a first-class civil war” (223).

Socialism allows the society to function – “eight-ninths below the water line, one-ninth above” (223) – because of its ability to use the machinery of the state to control people and keep them in their places.

### **The Virtues of “Science”**

Huxley identifies “science” as one of the institutions that keeps the elite World Controllers in power. Science in *Brave New World* amounts to (1) genetic manipulation that automatically places people into particular categories before they are born (putting alcohol into fetuses’ blood-surrogate, for example) and (2) environmental manipulation that brainwashes people into thinking in particular ways. “Hypnopaedia” conditioning – playing tapes with particular suggestions on them while children are asleep – teaches them the values they should have, depending on what class they are from.

Huxley is deeply suspicious of science, and he imbues Mustapha Mond with this same suspicion. Science in *Brave New World* does not seek to learn higher truths. It merely exists to keep the *status quo* in control. “All our science is just a cookery book, with an orthodox theory of cooking that nobody’s supposed to question, and a list of recipes that mustn’t be added to except by special permission from the head cook,” says Mustapha Mond (225). True science would be a threat to the stability of the society that

Mond has spent so much time attempting to create and sustain. The only kind of scientific innovation permitted in *Brave New World* is innovation that, curiously, stifles innovation. “We could synthesize every morsel of food, if we wanted to. But we don’t. We prefer to keep a third of the population on the land. For their own sakes – because it takes *longer* to get food out of the land than out of a factory,” says Mond (224).

This criticism applies to the twentieth century, as well, with its pervasive theories that *still* attempted to justify the genetic inferiority or superiority of particular races. Eugenics was merely racism justified by attaching “science” to it. *Brave New World* criticizes these kinds of pseudo-science as methods of allowing some groups of people to continue to be oppressed, but with a more “rational” means for a more rational world. As long as the justification for racism *appears* scientific, then agency is removed from human beings (“It’s not my fault the Gammas are inferior; they were born that way”). Huxley goes a step beyond exposing racism in science and creates a world in which science itself creates the conditions that justify that racism. We should be wary of science, Huxley suggests, for it can be used by elites to reinforce their control over marginalized peoples.

## **Dystopias of the Post-War and Cold War Eras**

When the dust of World War II had settled, the world was left with two superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union. More importantly, the world was left with two major, opposing, worldviews, assigned names according to their economic systems. The United States represented capitalism – the so-called First World – while the Soviet Union represented communism, the Second World. The ensuing Cold War was not a war, but a period of tension between the two superpowers with armed conflict on the peripheries, and mostly by proxy. Citizens of the United States lived fear of a nuclear attack or invasion from the Soviet Union. Such divisive figures as Joseph McCarthy conducted intensive searches for Soviet spies in the U.S. government. Some threats were real; others were imagined by a paranoia that the Soviet Union was behind every anti-American, anti-Capitalist movement around the world and within the United States.

### **Cold War Politics**

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948) concerns itself as much with the post-war world as the pre-war world. The period before World War II enjoyed a great rise in the popularity of fascism as a political system. George Orwell was only too aware of this fascist tendency, having fought with POUM, *el partido obrero de unidad marxista* (United Marxist Workers' Party) during the Spanish Civil War. From 1936 to 1939 the legitimate, democratic government of Spain fought against the incursion of the so-called

Nationalists, led by Francisco Franco. That war was won by the fascists in 1939 and Franco enjoyed complete control over Spain until his death in 1975. With Italy having elected Mussolini in 1921 and Germany having elected Hitler in 1933, the tendency toward liberal democracy that dominated after the French Revolution seemed to have changed. Three major Western countries, all of them democracies, had become dictatorships, and two of them had willingly elected dictators into power. Orwell was deeply concerned about this trend. "Totalitarian ideas have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical consequences," he wrote of his intentions in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (qtd. in Lewis 114). Indeed, in the novel, Emmanuel Goldstein's "history" of the world before 1984 is an embodiment of Orwell's fears. In his book *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, the book upon which the Party bases its principles, Goldstein writes that

by the fourth decade of the twentieth century all the main currents of political thought were authoritarian. The earthly paradise had been discredited at exactly the moment when it became realizable. Every new political theory, by whatever name it called itself, led back to hierarchy and regimentation. (210)

This fictional history of the twentieth century, written by one of the creators of an oppressive future regime, represents Orwell's fear of totalitarianism; in the history he creates for *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, his anxiety about fascism proves correct and the world becomes immersed in autocracy. Out of his fear of the prevalence of totalitarian systems (Stalinism, fascism, Nazism), Orwell creates a world that is dominated by three equally

totalitarian regimes: Oceania, Eastasia, and Eurasia, the social systems of which are “not distinguishable at all” from each other (Orwell 202). Numerous scholars have identified James Burnham’s *The Managerial Revolution* (1941) as the model for this tripartite world. Burnham’s book characterizes World War II as unlike any previous war and – prior to the war’s end – predicts “the rise of centralised bureaucratic super-states on the Stalinist or Nazi models” (Seed 69). Orwell himself was directly influenced by Burnham’s work, writing, “For Burnham’s geographical picture of the new world has turned out to be correct. More and more obviously the surface of the earth is being parceled off into three great empires” (qtd. in Crick 44). To the liberal philosopher living in the 1940s, a sudden rise of centralized totalitarian states can only mean that the world has entered a new historical trend, one in which brutal state practices might be “tolerated and even defended by people who considered themselves enlightened and progressive,” as described by Goldstein (Orwell 210).

These three super-states of Oceania, Eastasia, and Eurasia are in a state of constant war. Orwell creates a world in which World War II never ended, allowing a totalitarian state to take control: “the era of post-war austerity, severe rationing, unrepaired bomb damage, shabbiness, weariness, and shortages of such things as razor blades and cigarettes, forms the dingy background of 1984” (Lewis 112; see also Crick 21). Constant war is important for maintaining control of the populace and keeping them in a state of constant fear and separated from Eastasia and Eurasia, the other two super-states. Goldstein advises that a Party member “should have the mentality appropriate to a state of war. It does not matter whether the war is actually happening, and, since no

decisive victory is possible, it does not matter whether the war is going well or badly. All that is needed is that a state of war should exist” (197). War justifies the stoppage of everything for the “war effort.” The society stagnates. Progress stops, and with the stoppage of progress, also prevented is any kind of action or thought directed toward the future that might threaten the Party’s control. Later on, Goldstein writes:

When war is continuous there is no such thing as military necessity.

Technical progress can cease and the most palpable facts can be denied or disregarded. As we have seen, researches that could be called scientific are still carried out for the purposes of war, but they are essentially a kind of daydreaming, and their failure to show results is not important. Efficiency, even military efficiency, is no longer needed. (203)

One of the key requirements of fascism is a drive for militarism and through this militarism, an irrational hatred of anyone who does not belong to that fascist society. This, too, is to be found in Oceania. “It is absolutely necessary to [the super-states’] structure,” writes Goldstein, “that there should be no contact with foreigners except, to a limited extent, with war prisoners and colored slaves” (201). Having never gotten to know their enemies as people, and thus never being able to identify or sympathize with them, the citizens of each super-state can vilify the faceless citizens of the other super-states as barbarians and savages who should be exterminated. Constant war gives citizens an object of hatred, something around which they can all rally and direct their energies. A state-required “Two Minutes’ Hate” program every morning renews Party members’ vilification of Emmanuel Goldstein, an alleged party traitor, gathering them together in a

frenzied quasi-religious ceremony of “fear and invectiveness, a desire to kill, to torture, to smash faces with a sledge hammer” (14). Like the citizens of a fascist state, Party members create a fictional Other against which they can unify in common hatred. A Party member “is supposed to live in a continuous frenzy of hatred of foreign enemies and internal traitors, triumph over victories, and self-abasement before the power and wisdom of the Party” (217).

Critics have seen *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as an indictment of Stalinism as well as fascism. Stalin’s multiple-year plans (echoed by Orwell when the telescreen talks about the Ninth Three-Year Plan [2]) and collectivization schemes were ultimately responsible for the deaths of millions (some figures have him responsible for the deaths of more people than Hitler), mostly through starvation. Nevertheless, the Oceanic propaganda machine runs at full strength all the time, and no matter what conditions are like, numbers are adjusted to make it appear that production has increased from the previous year. One of the tasks that we watch Winston perform is the modification of numbers from the Ministry of Plenty. He alters forecasts from the previous quarter for the amount of boots produced to show that the Ministry exceeded its expectations, when in fact it had not met them. Although in the end, thinks Winston, “Very likely no boots had been produced at all. Likelier still, nobody knew how many had been produced, much less cared. All one knew was that every quarter astronomical numbers of boots were produced on paper, while perhaps half the population of Oceania went barefoot” (42). As in Stalin’s Russia, religion is prohibited for Party members, and only state-sanctioned media are ever seen by the public. There is no freedom of speech or of the press; the Party maintains a

monopoly on knowledge, but this is not a metaphorical monopoly on knowledge. The Party is, in actuality, the *only* source of knowledge for Party members. No one who did not live before the Party came to power can be sure of what the world was like before then, since the Party controls history.

### **The Bomb**

Early in the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union were the only two countries with “The Bomb,” a trope used to describe atomic bombs, hydrogen bombs, or nuclear missiles.<sup>2</sup> Given what the world knew from Hiroshima and Nagasaki about the horror that could be unleashed by a single atomic bomb, there was even more cause for concern as both the Americans and the Russians eventually stockpiled thousands of nuclear weapons that could, ostensibly, destroy the world. Science fiction literature – of which dystopian literature is frequently part – took this fear of The Bomb and ran with it. Isaac Asimov observed, “The dropping of the atomic bomb in 1945 made science fiction respectable” (qtd. in Seed 8). If dystopian literature extrapolates contemporary fears, certainly this was a gold mine for inspiration: the possibility that the push of a button could destroy all human life on Earth. When it came to The Bomb, however, the reading public knew that what they were reading was not that far from fiction: there *did* exist a figurative button somewhere that could destroy all human life on Earth. Dystopian literature of the post-war period invariably deals with the fear of a nuclear holocaust. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Both O’Brien and Goldstein’s book make cryptic references to a

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<sup>2</sup> Nuclear weapons technology progressed from the atomic bomb (A-bomb) to the hydrogen bomb (H-bomb) to the medium-range missile armed with a nuclear warhead to, finally, the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), which could travel across the planet to hit its target.

nuclear war: “. . . the ravages of the atomic war of the Nineteen-fifties have never been fully repaired” (193); “. . . atomic bombs first appeared as early as the Nineteen-forties, and were first used on a large scale about ten years later. At that time some hundreds of bombs were dropped on industrial centers, chiefly in European Russia, Western Europe, and North America” (199). Part of the reason that the world exists the way it does in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the extensive use of atomic bombs. Nuclear weapons created mass destruction and mass confusion, putting the world into a state that was powerless to resist the ascension of the Party into power. After these bombs were used as much as they could be without seriously damaging the populace, they were locked away never to be used again, only to be stockpiled. Orwell’s treatment about The Bomb, borrowed partially from another volume by James Burnham, *The Struggle for the World* (1947), is prophetic in that it depicts exactly what did happen during the Cold War: two sides, each unconquerable by the other, amass nuclear weapons as bargaining chips, all the while *preparing* for war but not actually *going* to war (Seed 69). “All three powers continue to produce atomic bombs and store them up against the decisive opportunity which they all believe will come sooner or later,” writes Goldstein (199). The Bomb is used in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as it would come to be used later in the Cold War, as a veiled threat, a suggestion that its awesome power *could* be used if it were necessary.

### **Technological Takeover**

The most prevalent fear in dystopian literature of the post-war era was the fear of technology. After World War II, technology – most notably the computer – took off, becoming more and more useful, but also generating more and more problems in the eyes

of satirists. During the Cold War, technology was used by the West as a weapon against the Soviet Union. During World War II, computers were discussed in terms of how they could aid the military. Computer research was funded by the War Department, as computers were used in fighting the war (Edwards 44). This changed little in the transition from World War to Cold War: technology was evaluated in terms of how it helped the United States maintain superiority over the Soviet Union. The military continued to be the party that funded most computer research. In 1950, the federal government contributed \$15-20 million per year to computer research (most of this from the military), while private industry contributed only \$5 million (61). Such a heavy contribution by the military to technological research in “peacetime” was considered suspect by dystopian writers of the Cold War, and they spun stories in which technology oppressed rather than helped.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, technology is used to keep the populace in check. Party propaganda comes largely through the telescreen, a television screen that is capable of both sending and receiving information simultaneously. It allows the Party to keep an eye – literally – on the activities of Party members, ensuring that they do nothing that is not outside the boundaries of Party approval. The telescreen is a science fiction extrapolation of the television, which had begun to be produced commercially by 1945. In his introduction to a 1984 edition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Bernard Crick discusses Orwell’s disapproval of television: “Orwell feared what its effect would be: the two-way screen is fanciful satire, [but] television itself was to Orwell an awful enough reality. Certainly he thought it would be used for surveillance, but also – like the other mass media – for

cultural debasement on which control of the proles depends” (14). With the advent of the telescreen, records Goldstein, “Every citizen, or at least every citizen important enough to be worth watching, could be kept for twenty-four hours a day under the eyes of the police and in the sound of official propaganda, with all other channels of communication closed” (Orwell 211).

Kurt Vonnegut’s *Player Piano* (1952), like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, takes place sometime after World War II. Like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it makes a synecdoche out of post-war events, turning them into a possible future. Unlike Orwell, however, Vonnegut depicts the United States as somewhat utopic. The world of the post-war economic boom has become the default standard of living. A complex national computer system makes sure that everyone has enough of everything, ensuring that there is no poverty or hunger. Everything is centrally controlled. Vonnegut has created an *anti-utopia*: a utopian world with dystopic implications. Ilium, New York, the setting for *Player Piano*, is used to represent the whole of the United States, as most towns are like it. Bureaucrats and engineers have teamed up with technology to take over the country, and while their intentions do not create the overt oppression of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, neither do they create the utopia that they were hoping for.

The society of technology that Vonnegut envisions came out of his fictional version of the end of World War II, when computers were increasingly given more power over American society so as to better regulate the war effort. The laws of inertia being what they are, power was not returned to human beings once the war was over. Instead,

EPICAC<sup>3</sup>, the nerve center of a nationwide computer network, remained in control and assumed other functions beyond its original design. Housed in Carlsbad Caverns, EPICAC grows as its duties increase, and it decides “how many refrigerators, how many lamps, how many turbine-generators, how many hub caps, how many dinner plates, how many door knobs, how many rubber heels, how many television sets, how many pinochle decks – how many everything America and her customers could have and how much they would cost” (118). America is mechanized, with machines doing most repetitive tasks and even skilled craftwork. Factory workers – who attended machines after the first Industrial Revolution – have nothing to do. Their options are to join the army or the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps (R&RC), a group composed of unemployed former factory workers who undertake public works projects – not of the Hoover Dam variety, but of the busy-work type that give people something to do every day.

The primary storyline of the novel, that of Paul Proteus, is contrasted with the secondary storyline, which focuses on the visiting Shah of the fictional country of Bratpuhr. The Shah, who comes from an ostensibly more primitive society than that of the United States, acts as an external critic of the new technological order. The fact that he has no prior understanding of how this society works allows him to be an objective observer. In viewing such a large government role in private industry, he calls it *kuppo*, “communism” in his language. His escort, Ewing Halyard, is quick to dispel such an idea. He also refers to the members of the R&RC as *takaru* – “slave” (20-23). Certainly his

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<sup>3</sup> The name “EPICAC” is a Vonnegut-esque pun which refers to ENIAC, a computer built for the War Department and unveiled in 1946, and Ipecac, a substance that induces vomiting. Cf. James Van Der Spiegel, et al., “The ENIAC: History, Operation, and Reconstruction in VLSI,” *The First Computers: History and Architectures*, eds. Raúl Rojas and Ulf Hashagen (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2000), 123-27.

observations can be motivated by a lack of social understanding and problems with translation, but in a novel of social criticism, these are no mere errors. Vonnegut *wants* his readers to consider the communistic implications of *Player Piano*'s America. The centralized planning of EPICAC (see above), in which a computer decides how much of everything should be produced, is socialism without human intervention. There are no planning committees or multi-year plans; EPICAC decides what to produce and how much of it to produce.

At the same time that Vonnegut critiques a Soviet-style centralized state, he also criticizes private industry. The events in *Player Piano* point to a second Industrial Revolution, says M. Keith Booker: "Whereas in the original Industrial Revolution human muscle was replaced by machine, in this new Industrial Revolution routine human thought is replaced by machines" (101). Even the President of the United States is a figurehead who has no real job to do, thanks to EPICAC. The President, Jonathan Lynn, is "boyish, tall, beautiful, and disarming" and possesses "an endearing, adolescent combination of brashness and shyness" but never even graduated from high school (119). Halyard considers him "a gorgeous dummy" whose only job is to "read whatever was handed to him on state occasions: to be suitably awed and reverent, as he said, for all the ordinary, stupid people who'd elected him to office, to run wisdom from somewhere else through that resonant voicebox and between those even, pearly choppers" (120). The function of industry in *Player Piano* is, as in *Brave New World*, to produce things for consumers to buy. In this hypercapitalist world, "modern technology has made

production so efficient that humans are more and more becoming necessary not as workers who produce goods, but as consumers who buy them” (Booker 101).

In the polarized post-war world, either the Soviets or the Americans were going to win the ideological battle for the world economy, and Vonnegut posits that, given contemporary technological developments, Americans would win that war but would simultaneously surrender their freedoms to technology. Thomas Wymer says, “Vonnegut goes beyond a simple attack on technology by suggesting that the real tragedy is that man has defined himself in a way that makes him replaceable by machines, that man has defined his own value as he defines the value of an object” (qtd. in Booker 104).

Vonnegut is not criticizing technology, but the human tendency to go beyond using technology as a tool and *allowing* themselves to be replaced by technology. During the first Industrial Revolution, manual labor was replaced by machines. In *Player Piano*, “routine mental work” (14) that caused the “annoyance or boredom that people used to experience in routine jobs” (52) is replaced by machines. There is even a hint that, perhaps, someday, there will be a third Industrial Revolution in which human thought is replaced by machines (14-15). Vonnegut is aware of current trends in the development of computers, mentioning Norbert Wiener by name in the first chapter (14). Wiener, an MIT mathematician, believed that “there is a second industrial revolution in the making whose object is the replacement of the human brain” (Ellul 42).

The post-war *world* is not the only thing that is polarized. Post-war *America* is also severely polarized. On the one hand are the haves: the bureaucrats and the engineers. On the other hand are the have-nots: the R&RC members, the members of the

Army. Technology has created a new aristocratic class that justifies its existence not by how much wealth it has or what kind of nobility it has, but by its *intelligence*. I.Q. is everything. A person without a college degree is guaranteed to amount to nothing. But as the revolutionary Reverend Lasher points out, what is in question here is not necessarily *intelligence* but *obedience*: “Not only must a person be bright, but he must be bright in certain approved, useful directions: basically, management or engineering” (93). Paul’s friend Finnerty is portrayed as a genius. “Finnerty could be anything he wanted to be, and be brilliant at it. Whatever the times might have called for, Finnerty would have been among the best,” says Paul of Finnerty (35). Finnerty, however, is a proverbial loose cannon who does not like to play by the rules, and for this reason he does not belong anywhere. No one will take him since no one wants to put up with his unorthodoxy. The end result of this society operated by technology is class polarization, despite attempts to equalize the playing field a little bit. Offering another Marxist critique of America, Vonnegut suggests that it doesn’t matter *what* the intentions of the people are who make machines. The advantage will always be theirs, since they own the machines. They will give themselves a larger salary because they are in charge. They will value themselves more highly than anyone else, and as a result, everyone else will, too.

The Revolution predicted by Vonnegut comes to fruition two or three times over in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968). The fear of The Bomb has become a reality, as we learn that the world has only recently recovered from a nuclear war. Dick paints a terrible picture of post-apocalyptic horror:

The morning air, spilling over with radioactive motes, gray and sun-beclouding, belched about him, haunting his nose; he sniffed involuntarily the taint of death. Well, that was too strong a description for it, he decided as he made his way to the particular plot of sod which he owned along with the unduly large apartment below. The legacy of World War Terminus had diminished in potency; those who could not survive the dust had passed into oblivion years ago, and the dust, weaker now and confronting the strong survivors, only deranged minds and genetic properties. (8)

Just as we always feared, there has been a nuclear war. It has ravaged most of the world, destroying animal species to such a degree that everyone is required by law to own an animal in order to re-populate the planet with animals.

The post-Apocalyptic setting, however, only provides a justification for the existence of *androids*, sophisticated automatons that mimic humans in almost every way. Life on Earth has become so bad that humans have started moving to other planets – Mars, in particular (a favorite location for Dick stories). These humans have taken androids with them to be their servants. Androids in the year 2021 are so life-like that an elaborate test, the Voigt-Kampff test, is the only way to determine whether a person is human or android, outside of an inspection of the person's bone marrow. Eldon Rosen, president of the Rosen Association, which manufactures the Nexus-6 androids that the book focuses on, explains that it was the *colonists* who demanded life-like androids, and

if the Rosen Association hadn't bowed to customers' demands, they would have gone out of business (54).

The prospect of an artificial, lifelike computer (the book suggests that androids are part biological and part electronic<sup>4</sup>) contained inside a human being could only become a reality if computers – previously relegated to vacuum tubes – could become smaller and able to be integrated into something the size of a human brain. Throughout the 1960s, Dick's own time, scientists at Intel and Texas Instruments were attempting to integrate all the functions of cumbersome vacuum tubes into small chips, eliminating the need for room-sized computers. In 1971, Intel released the first "computer in a chip," the Intel 4004. Clearly, the notion that a computer could fit onto something that could fit in the palm of a hand was not science fiction when Dick was writing *Electric Sheep*.

Nor was the so-called Turing Test ("The Imitation Game"), devised in 1950 by the philosopher Alan Turing. Turing's test is a method of determining whether or not artificial intelligence (AI) has become equal to human intelligence. He proposes placing a computer and a human in a separate room from another human, the interrogator. The interrogator knows the human and computer only as "X" and "Y," not knowing which is the human and which is the computer. The interrogator asks questions of X and Y, attempting to discern through the answers which one is the computer. The computer's goal is to appear so human-like in its responses that it fools the interrogator into thinking

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<sup>4</sup> A description of an android's Nexus-6 unit being destroyed suggests that there are electrical as well as biological components inside an android: "The Nexus-6 unit which operated it blew into pieces, a raging, mad wind which carried throughout the car. Bits of it, like radioactive dust itself, whirled down on Rick" (93).

that *it* is the human (Oppy and Dow). Turing was so confident in the growth of AI that he believed

that in about fifty years' time it will be possible to programme computers, with a storage capacity of about  $10^9$ , to make them play the imitation game so well that an average interrogator will not have more than 70 percent chance of making the right identification after five minutes of questioning. . . . I believe that at the end of the century the use of words and general educated opinion will have altered so much that one will be able to speak of machines thinking without expecting to be contradicted. (Oppy and Dow)

Artificial intelligence has, in the world of *Electric Sheep*, progressed to the point where it is nearly impossible to distinguish between humans and androids without the Voigt-Kampff test. Deckard's concern is that the new generation of androids, the Nexus-6, may be able to beat the test. The Voigt-Kampff is a test of empathy. It gauges the respondent's emotional responses to various situations ("You are given a calf-skin wallet on your birthday," "You have a little boy and he shows you his butterfly collection, including his killing jar," "In a magazine you come across a full-page color picture of a nude girl" [48-49]) and through these responses, the test operator is able to determine whether or not the respondent is an android.

Dick's novel presents its reader with a moral dilemma for the computer age: What if an organism could be created that was so human-like that it were almost impossible to distinguish between the two? At what point does it actually become something

approximating human? The government on Earth considers androids to be machines, property. They are not permitted on Earth, only on off-world colonies. The narrative in *Electric Sheep* takes us through Deckard's attempt to "retire" six Nexus-6 androids that have escaped from Mars and his moral dilemma with killing something that looks and acts so human.

In Dick's own lifetime, the microprocessor became a reality. Computers would not be relegated to entire rooms. A computer could be placed inside a brain. Or a brain could be made out of a computer. With a little science-fiction creativity, Dick fashioned a narrative about sophisticated robots that looked and acted like human beings. His rhetorical question is, "At what point does the robot cease being a machine and start being human?" With the advent of Intel's 4-bit processor, the question became less and less rhetorical and more and more pragmatic. Dick posits that within sixty years machines will become self-aware. Through the character of Deckard, he raises the question of ethics: is it right to kill something that is, as far as he can tell, human? Deckard even goes so far as to fall in love with Rachael Rosen, another Nexus-6 android.

The parallel between humans and machines is not unique to the twentieth century. Since at least the seventeenth century, philosophers have equated human beings with automatons (literally, "self movement," though taken in that time to refer to mechanical – not electrical – devices which behaved as though they were moving by themselves). Dick is not the first person to equate humans and machines, but he does ask, "How do we know *we* are not machines ourselves?" Writers in the seventeenth century had to use a good deal of imagination to create a fanciful scenario in which such automatons existed,

but with recent technological advances, the scenario became more pressing for Dick. Science was, potentially, on the cusp of actually creating automatons.

In his *First Meditation*, Rene Descartes wonders how he can be sure God is not intentionally manipulating his reality so as to deceive him into thinking that he sees is real, when in fact it is not. “It is possible that God has wished that I should be deceived every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square, or form some judgement even simpler, if anything simpler than that can be imagined,” Descartes says (98). This notion of “How do I know I am not being deceived?” comes up again in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Time and time again, the audience and the characters themselves are asked to call into question what may or may not be a real human being. The science fictional device of an almost perfectly human automaton allows this questioning to occur: there is no way of knowing whether anyone else is an android, or, for that matter, of knowing whether *I* am an android. At one point, Deckard even takes the Voight-Kampff test just to objectively ensure that he is not an android. In the world of the novel, such a test is definitive proof of humanity. For Descartes, and for the rest of us, there is no such test. There is no way of knowing whether or not we are being deceived – either in the sense that God is deceiving us into believing that what we experience with our senses is true or in the sense that everyone else is deceiving us into believing that we are not androids.

Empathy is chosen as the distinction between androids and humans. Humans are capable of empathy; androids are not. But the human capacity for empathy and non-empathy is called into question in the case of Phil Resch, another bounty hunter who

ruthlessly kills the android Luba Luft. “There is a defect in your empathic, role-taking ability. One which we don’t test for. Your feelings toward androids,” says Deckard to Resch (140). He later changes his mind and concludes, “There’s nothing unnatural or unhuman [sic] about Phil Resch’s reactions: *it’s me*” (142). Being human is not merely about *having* empathy: it is also about being able to *suspend* that empathy in order to kill something that, as far as anyone else is concerned, is a human being.

Ironically, the creation of an empathy/non-empathy hierarchy between humans and androids exposes human beings’ startling *lack* of empathy. If a non-human is defined as a being with the inability to demonstrate empathy, then what is Phil Resch in the moment that he kills an android? A human being with the ability to switch empathy on and off is *not* the perfect human being. Only a *machine* – which can be programmed with empathy or not – would make a perfect human being, for it would never be able to turn its empathy off (although in this case, the androids can never turn their empathy on).

*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* was adapted into the film *Blade Runner* by Ridley Scott in 1982. Made fourteen years after the publication of Dick’s novel, the film has an entirely different focus from the book. *Blade Runner* does not concern itself with the hypocrisy of human empathy. It is, instead, more concerned with the androids: their mortality and their capacity for love. Roy Batty is on a quest to find his creator and answers to questions about himself. In a voice-over from the theatrical version, Deckard hypothesizes about why Batty saved his life:

I don't know why he saved my life. Maybe in those last moments he loved life more than he ever had before. Not just his life, anybody's life, my life.

All he'd wanted were the same answers the rest of us want. Where did I come from? Where am I going? How long have I got? All I could do was sit there and watch him die.

Unlike human beings, Roy Batty and the other androids have the ability to meet their creators personally and come close to understanding their purpose. Batty and the rest of the escaped androids have a limited amount of time to find these answers, as the Tyrell Corporation (the company that makes androids, analogous to the Rosen Association) has given them four-year life spans as a failsafe in case they escape. We are meant to understand Batty and the other androids' escape from an off-world colony as an attempt to learn more about themselves and their reason for existing. At the same time, they hope that their creator will be able to extend their life spans. Unfortunately, the androids are almost pathological in their desire to know why they are alive. When Tyrell tells Roy Batty that he cannot extend his life, Roy kills him.

*Blade Runner* focuses also on the similarity between androids and human beings. It makes more of the relationship between Rachael and Deckard, asking us what the ethics are of falling in love with a machine that is so human-like that it might as well be human. Such a relationship may be allowed in a humanist ethical system, but the prevailing cultural norms of 21st-century Los Angeles will not allow it. This is why Deckard and Rachael leave the city, with the other blade runner, Gaff, leaving his trademark paper unicorn behind to let them know that he was at Deckard's apartment but did not kill Rachael, since he understood Deckard's emotional predicament. The director's cut of *Blade Runner* ends with Deckard and Rachael leaving his apartment

toward some uncertain future, but the original theatrical version ended with the two of them in a natural environment outside the city, away from the interference of human beings, laws, and technology. Vivian Sobchack criticizes this original ending as nothing more than an imaginary experience, since human experience in the postmodern era is never “unmediated, immediate, ‘natural’”:

This new sense we have that everything in our lives is mediated and cultural explains, perhaps, why Deckard and Rachael’s escape into the “natural” landscape at the end of *Blade Runner* seems so implausible and artificial. The landscape seems completely imaginary – unnatural in its “naturalness,” its lack of the “real” social density we have previously experienced. Thus the “nature” cinematography strikes us as an inauthentic “special effect” compared to the technical special effects we have seen and accepted as authentically “natural” – and we become reluctantly aware of both cinema and narrative straining in their work to produce a traditionally “happy” ending. (237)

The subsequent director’s cut of *Blade Runner* – which ostensibly more closely mirrors Ridley Scott’s vision for the film (for the production of a film involves numerous people other than the director, and frequently such decisions about how to end a film are made with audience reception in mind rather than thematic consistency; the director’s cut more accurately reflects what the director *really* wanted the film to look like) – does not feature an idealized Golden Country; rather, it shuns the phoniness of a “happy ending” in favor of an ending in which Deckard, an android bounty-hunter, and Rachael, his android lover,

face an uncertain future which could be granted more certainty by the audience. The time is coming, says Scott to his audience, when we will have to decide whether androids are human or not, and what happens to Deckard and Rachael at the end of the film is up to you to decide based upon your future attitudes.

The effects of technology upon human beings is prevalent also in Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), where behavior modification is used to force criminals to rehabilitate themselves. Burgess posits an interesting moral question: whether or not forcing behavior modification is a good thing to do, since it takes choice away from the human being. "It may be horrible to be good. And when I say that to you I realize how self-contradictory that sounds. I know I shall have many sleepless nights about this. What does God want? Does God want goodness or the choice of goodness? Is a man who chooses the bad perhaps in some way better than a man who has the good imposed upon him?" asks the prison chaplain of Alex's behavior-modification therapy (95). The implication is that the most important part of choosing to be good or not is the *act* of choosing. The imposition of goodness or badness removes agency from the human mind, and this is seen as more an act of programming (possibly brainwashing) than anything else. The human is not good because he chooses to be, but good because he will be punished if he does evil.

Behind this criticism of behavior-modification is a criticism of contemporary thought about the human mind. Booker offers as an example B.F. Skinner's *Walden Two*, written "as a reaction to the post-World War II sense of cultural crisis and as an attempt to delineate a utopian alternative to the ills of Western society in the late 1940s" (91-92).

In Skinner's utopia, "children in the community are subjected to a detailed and carefully designed program of conditioning from the very moment of birth, so that by a relatively early age they have thoroughly absorbed the ideology upon which the community is based" (92). *A Clockwork Orange* questions the feasibility and desirability of such a society, taking a utopian idea and criticizing it.

Burgess's dystopia is situated in a world where *nadsat*, a combination of British rhyming slang and Russian, is the slang of choice for the main character, Alex, and his "droogs." The prevalence of Russian suggests that perhaps the Russians won the Cold War, contributing to a future of lawlessness and violence. "Milk-bars," which sell milk adulterated with psychotropic drugs, are commonplace. Prisons are overcrowded; Alex says of his prison cell, "a dirty cally disgrace it was, there not being decent room for a chelloveck to stretch his limbs" (84). The prison warden complains that, in overcrowded prisons, "You get concentrated criminality, crime in the midst of punishment" He then adds, cryptically, "Soon we may be needing all our prison space for political offenders" (92). A government crackdown on political offenders indicates that the state in Burgess's dystopian future is more authoritarian than in the past, although this is ancillary to the central theme of forced rehabilitation and reflects a more general fear of totalitarianism that runs through practically all dystopian literature.

### **Dystopias of the Post-Cold War Era**

American dystopias like *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) and *Parable of the Sower* (1993) were not as concerned with world events and focused almost exclusively on the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. While Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* was published five years *before* the fall of the Soviet Union, the book's subject matter is domestic, not international. The book does not concern itself with anything related to the Cold War, and as such, I have classified it in this section even though, chronologically, it is still within the realm of the Cold War. *Parable of the Sower* (1993) falls well outside the boundaries of the Cold War and similarly deals with domestic issues in the United States. The Post-Cold War Era could best be characterized as an era when conservatives, who had taken power in the 1980s under Ronald Reagan, saw the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 as an indication that their side was correct. Even though Bill Clinton served as president for most of the 1990s, it was Republicans who had control of Congress for six of Clinton's eight years.

### **The Radical Right**

With conservative politicians in power in the 1980s, radical conservative religious groups briefly came into the mainstream, as they now had a political "in." *The Handmaid's Tale* posits "a nightmare future in which such forces have established control of the government" (Booker 162). By the early 1990s, according to the book's

chronology, religious militants have assassinated the president and members of Congress and established a Protestant Christian theocracy, the Republic of Gilead. Laws are enforced according to the Bible. Religious difference is not tolerated in a United States where evangelical Protestants are in control (the very same people who became so prominent in the 1980s). Baptists, Quakers, atheists, and abortion doctors are all persecuted or killed (20, 32, 83).

What is most important to *The Handmaid's Tale* is the treatment of women. A hierarchy exists in this society: Commanders (who are both military and spiritual commanders, as evidenced by their ambiguous title, "Commanders of the Faith"), their wives, Marthas (who operate the daily duties of households), and Handmaids. Just like Abraham's handmaid, Handmaids serve as vehicles for procreation: once a week, a commander has sex with his Handmaid exclusively for the purpose of procreation. Women are forbidden to read and have no apparent rights. They must do as they are told.

The most curious aspect of *The Handmaid's Tale* is the way Offred, the narrator, treats this denigration of women. On the one hand, of course, women have no rights. But on the other hand, they are sacred and revered. Offred muses about the time before the takeover of Gilead:

Don't open your door to a stranger, even if he says he is the police. Make him slide his ID under the door. Don't stop on the road to help a motorist pretending to be in trouble. Keep the locks on and keep going. If anyone whistles, don't turn to look. Don't go into a Laundromat, by yourself, at night. (24)

In the Republic of Gilead, “no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles” (24). These differing cultural norms present a problem: which one is better? On the one hand, Offred lived in fear of being killed or raped before the Gileadeans took control, but she had her freedom. In Gilead, she has no freedom, but she never has to worry about being killed or raped. The figure of Aunt Lydia, one of the women responsible for training Handmaids, appears as a symbol of the conservative Christian attitude toward women: “There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it” (24).

Margaret Atwood, though obviously suggesting that the America of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is dystopic and undesirable, does not present that opinion by itself. While she encourages her readers to come to that conclusion, she engages them in some debate about the idea. There are definitely perks to being a woman in Gilead. Atwood asks us to wonder whether or not these perks are worth the price of freedom. Passing a movie theater, Offred remembers the films she saw there once:

Students went there a lot; every spring they had a Humphrey Bogart festival, with Lauren Bacall or Katharine Hepburn, women on their own, making up their minds. They wore blouses with buttons down the front that suggested the possibilities of the word *undone*. These women could be undone; or not. We were a society dying, said Aunt Lydia, of too much choice. (25)

Prior to the establishment of Gilead, women were able to choose whether or not they wanted to be viewed sexually. This, of course, could prompt unwanted advances by men. In Gilead, the society has already made the choice for them: women have no sexuality, and they should not be viewed sexually. Being sexually open makes one the possible object of the male gaze renders one “visible” to men. In Gilead, “Modesty is invisibility, said Aunt Lydia. Never forget it. To be seen – to be *seen* – is to be – her voice trembled – penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable” (28).

As with *A Clockwork Orange*, the issue is choice. A free society gives Alex freedom *to* commit violent acts. A free society gives Offred the freedom *to* be a sexual being. In some instances, neither of these options is desirable. An authoritarian society protects everyone else by restricting Alex’s freedom of choice and protects Offred from being raped or killed by restricting her freedom of choice.

While the conservative Christian world of Gilead attempts to deny the existence of sexuality, it cannot fully repress sexual tendencies. This is where Offred introduces us to Jezebel’s, an exclusive, Commanders-only underground establishment where the Commanders go to obtain sex for pleasure, as opposed to what they do with the handmaids, which is sex for utility. Offred’s Commander explains to her that, even though sex for pleasure is strictly forbidden, “everyone’s human, after all” (237). The act of denying the existence of sexual instincts does not make those instincts go away. Jezebel’s offers a critique of the sincerity of the leaders of Gilead. As Booker notes (though it is quite an understatement), “There may be something bogus about the religious ideology that rules Gilead” (165). Atwood’s critique of the hypocrisy of Gilead

parallels a similar critique of contemporary Christian evangelists like Robertson and Falwell. They may talk the Christian talk, but they may not necessarily walk the Christian walk, especially given the Jim Bakker scandal, in which Bakker, a televangelist, misappropriated money given to him by his devout followers. A society which purports to be ruled by Christian values will ultimately succumb to political turmoil as well as human weaknesses. On the surface (literally), women have protection from attack. At the underground world of Jezebel's, Commanders are free to disregard this "freedom from" rhetoric and treat women as sex objects, anyway.

As with *The Iron Heel*, *The Handmaid's Tale* is conscious of its existence as a work of art. Atwood ends the novel with a section called "Historical Notes" which indicates that the Republic of Gilead will someday fall, replaced by something that cannot be called utopic, but neither can it be called dystopic. It is more of a return to the world that the reader is familiar with, but also a return to a state of ignorance. "The most serious point raised about the present in terms of the future, not that of Gilead, but of the liberal post-Gilead culture, is how little has been learned," says Murphy (34). The cycle of history has come around again to a period where women are just as marginalized as they are now. The academics at the historical conference are more concerned with picayune historical details of the Commander's life. No attention is paid to the horrible status of women in Gilead. This pseudo-documentary is a little more ambiguous than *The Iron Heel*, for it suggests another dystopia may be around the corner:

To assume that Gilead will not occur because we are all too liberal for it is to ignore the overt parallels between the "it-can't-happen-here" mentality

of Atwood's future academic speaker and the "we've-already-won-the-battles-over-racism-and-sexism" mentality of many present-day professionals (who, accordingly, oppose further affirmative action or deny the need to overthrow rather than reform patriarchy). (35)

The old cliché about history – that if we do not learn from it, we are doomed to repeat it – appears to be coming true in the "Historical Notes" appendix. Attitudes about women have come full circle, back to the way they were in the 1980s. The historians of the future treat Gilead as an historical abnormality, to be studied like a disease. They are concerned with describing the progression of this disease of ultra-conservatism, but they are not at all concerned with addressing its cause, since the cause has been allegedly eliminated. Academics can self-righteously pat themselves on the back, knowing that they live in a more civilized time where such things do not occur. Such arguments are forwarded today: women have jobs, women are more represented, the fight for equality is over. The problem is that once the *fight* for equality ends and the populace becomes complacent, the system of patriarchy (or racism, if we replace "women" with "racial minorities") creeps back in, because while the state and institutions may recognize women as equal, underlying cultural attitudes about women remain the same. Pointing to more women in the workplace may be a start toward equality, but more women in the workplace does not mean that attitudes about female inferiority (or female sexuality) have changed.

### **Critiques of Capitalism *Redux***

The other thing that the 1980s did to society was allow the wealthy to become wealthier. Reagan tax cuts went primarily to the wealthy and allowed them to become

richer and richer, while at the same time cutting funding for social programs. These wealthy-favorable policies are allowed to go to their logical conclusion, and in *Parable of the Sower*, they create a United States which is in the middle of a class war with itself.

Set in the fictional Los Angeles suburb of Robledo in the years 2024-2027, *Parable of the Sower* follows a black teenaged girl, Lauren Olamina, on a trek to somewhere better than the place she lives. Los Angeles, like the rest of the country, is crime-ridden and drug-ridden:

Even in Robledo, most of the street poor – squatters, winos, junkies, homeless people in general – are dangerous. They’re desperate or crazy or both. That’s enough to make anyone dangerous. [. . .] They carry untreated diseases and festering wounds. They have no money to spend on water to wash with so even the unwounded have sores. They don’t get enough to eat so they’re malnourished – or they eat bad food and poison themselves.

(9)

The government has given up on these poor parts of the country. The police are corrupt, and police and fire departments have become privatized and expensive. The government no longer provides water or sanitation services (except for high prices), and yet it finds a way to spend money on an unsuccessful space program to Mars that results in the death of one of its astronauts (15).<sup>5</sup> A new president, Christopher Donner, has been elected who “has a plan for putting people back to work. He hopes to get the laws changed, suspend

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<sup>5</sup> Butler’s sequel to *Parable of the Sower*, *Parable of the Talents* (1998), explains in further detail that stability in the United States came to an end around 2015 with an event called “the Pox,” which resulted in socioeconomic collapse (Moylan 224).

‘overly restrictive’ minimum wage, environmental, and worker protection laws” (24). *Sower* is set up in a capitalist dystopia, where the needs of private corporations are infinitely more important than the needs of private citizens, and the federal government sets policy accordingly. The world is like *The Iron Heel*, except the capitalist takeover has already happened, and there is no middle-class intellectual to lead a revolt. Attitudes about the ability of individuals to overthrow an oppressive system have changed. In 1907, such a revolt was possible. In 1993, Butler suggests that the economic and social damage done to the middle class would be too great for them to lead a revolt. The people in Lauren’s neighborhood have enough trouble keeping robbers out, let alone overthrow the government.

For some people, there is hope – for a price, of course. A company called KSF creates a “company town” in Olivar, California, and advertises clean water and safety. The company, though, pays its workers poorly: “That’s an old company-town trick – get people into debt, hang on to them, and work them harder. Debt slavery. That might work in Christopher Donner’s America. Labor laws, state and federal, are not what they used to be,” says Lauren (107). The novel is very much like *The Grapes of Wrath* in its views of the government helping capitalists to extort money out of workers. Later on in the book, when Lauren is making her way north out of California, she and her ragtag band of followers meet up with some others who bring horror stories of working for agribusiness conglomerates:

Workers were paid, but in company scrip, not in cash. Rent was charged for workers’ shacks. Workers had to pay for food, for clothing – new or

used – for everything they needed, and of course they could only spend their company notes at the company store. Wages – surprise! – were never quite enough to pay the bills. According to new laws which might or might not exist, people were not permitted to leave an employer to whom they owed money. They were obligated to work off debt either as quasi-indentured people or as convicts. That is, if they refused to work, they could be arrested, jailed, and in the end, handed over to their employers. (259)

Society in 2025 approaches near-feudal levels of class disparity as the middle class ceases to exist. “Mid-level jobs (professional, managerial, industrial, technical) and middle-class lifestyles disappear in a social vacuum in which the critical mass needed to mount an anti-corporate movement and build a different social system is no longer viable,” says Moylan (225). The middle class has always been a necessary factor in any significant societal change, and their dissolution has made change impossible. They must either succumb to the capitalists and attempt to become elite themselves, or face life in a Hobbesian state of nature in which families fear for their lives every day.

Having lost faith in social institutions, Lauren turns to *change*, the only thing which she sees as a constant in her life. Her new religion becomes one she invented herself, Earthseed. According to Earthseed, “God is change” (22). Lauren opts for a more deistic approach to the divine, perhaps the only way she can explain how an omniscient being could let the world fall into the horror it has. “My God doesn’t love me or hate me or watch over me or know me at all, and I feel no love for or loyalty to my God. My God

just is,” she says (22). Earthseed’s goal is to “take root among the stars” (75); that is, to leave Earth and to start a new society somewhere else without the pre-existing problems of Earth institutions. Such a goal will be tough with President Donner’s call to “dismantle the ‘wasteful, pointless, unnecessary’ moon and Mars programs. Near space programs dealing with communications and experimentation will be privatized – sold off” (23-24). An inward focus, a focus on Earth, would prevent new and better societies from forming somewhere beyond Earth and would take power away from *de facto* autocrats like President Donner and his friends at KSF.

## Conclusions

What is the point of all of this dystopian fiction? Dystopian fiction, more than any other kind of literature, is inextricably tied to the time period in which it was written. At the outset, I asked two questions: “Why would Jack London and Octavia Butler both choose to write capitalist dystopias even though they are separated by race, gender, and a good ninety years? What makes the circumstances of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley so different that their respective novels should be so different?” The answer lies in the fact that dystopian literature is written to address unique problems that exist in the societies of its authors. Jack London and Octavia Butler both lived in eras in which capitalism was a perceived social ill. Not only did they attempt to get their readers to understand and recognize social injustice, but they induced those readers to do something about those social ills. The reader is an integral part of dystopian literature, for it is the reader’s attitudes that will allow the future to come true as written down, or to change into something better. This is why some dystopian works lose meaning as time goes on, necessitating annotations in the case of Bernard Crick’s edition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: an audience which does not come from the culture of the novel’s author – including from a culture in a different *time* – may not understand the object of attack, since it is not the target audience. Dystopias are written with particular cultural vocabulary in mind. Even the settings and events in dystopian novels may be unrecognizable to foreigners: people not living in the United States in the 1980s would not immediately equate Gilead with the

Religious Right. The book was not written in an attempt to explain such a situation to all people, everywhere: it was written for Americans in the 1980s so that they might recognize the encroachment of religious conservatives and do something to stop it.

Where utopian literature gives social criticism by offering for comparison a world better than the one we live in, dystopian literature gives social criticism by offering for comparison a world *worse* than the one we live in, suggesting that there are problems to be solved and we can do better. The narratives of dystopias are themselves pessimistic, but their inherent suggestions are optimistic. “Dystopian critiques of existing systems would be pointless unless a better system appeared conceivable,” says Booker (15). The authors who write dystopias hope that their literature will key their audiences in to existing social problems, and after learning about these problems, they might improve their world and change the course of history from dystopia to something better.

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