

Quasi-Plagiarism vs. Human Universality in the Dystopian Genre

I. General Abstract

Dystopian literature characteristically addresses the plight of the “everyman” as he copes with the oppression imposed by a totalitarian regime. Touchstone writers of the genre known for novels including *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Brave New World* and *Anthem* have, however, been scrutinized for creating uncannily similar plots. While scholars have linked the writers’ ideas back to a Russian predecessor, the novel *We*, this research explores how a charge of quasi-plagiarism is a shallow explanation. The great question being explored in any dystopian novel is whether government can save mankind from itself by eradicating individual will. The commonalities among that individual will dictate the appearance of a world without it. It is because of human universals such as love, family and a desire for knowledge that these dystopian novels focus on the prevention of love through the regulation of sex, communal rearing of children, and thought-level censorship of ideas.

II. Professional Abstract

My thesis research project is an examination of the relationship between the worst-case-scenario and the human mind’s defense center. I will use both my English and Psychology majors in this effort by focusing on dystopian authors’ conditioning of readers. A dystopia may be defined as a work of fiction that is the polar opposite of a utopia, depicting an often post-apocalyptic society wrought with oppression and terror. I hypothesize that the dystopia has powers of political persuasion superior to other genres because it functions to operantly condition readers in B.F. Skinner’s most literal sense of the phrase. Specifically, by this I mean that negative reinforcement is at play; readers are motivated to manipulate their behavior so as to avoid the negative stimuli introduced in the novels. A reader actively thinks and attempts to

problem-solve for the protagonist as he or she navigates through the conflict of a book, and the dystopian writer capitalizes on the reader's emotions to condition his or her thinking.

What devices do these writers wield to this end? How is this fierce verisimilitude conveyed so that suspension of disbelief leaves a lasting effect on the subconscious of dystopian readers? I will pinpoint the archetypical protagonist of the genre, the provoked "everyman," as a mirror. This reflective effect works by the same logic that when watching a thriller film, it is far more frightening if the character futilely attempts to escape a killer by making the same decisions as would the viewer. I will test my hypothesis by studying a plagiarism controversy within the genre surrounding four dystopian novels including *We*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Brave New World*, and *Anthem*. I will explore this controversy to show how the restraints of both operant conditioning and human universality dictate a pattern that must be followed by dystopian authors. At its essence, my project is about using the bleak background of dystopian literature to discover the subtle shades of meaning between the words "persuasion" and "condition".

II. Project Proposal

"Big Brother is watching" is a term that has pervaded Western culture since George Orwell published *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and made the mustachioed dictator a symbol of government oppression. Tongue and cheek, the phrase is spoken today by citizens referencing the surveillance at the BMV. With less confident smiles, they equate Big Brother to the suited agents granted rights by the Patriot Act. Of course, this isn't the only iconic phrase to transcend fiction. The greatness of literature is that it routinely implants such beads of perspiration on the brows of naïve or apathetic citizens. However, I will demonstrate that the dystopian genre is the superlative formula for cultivating a healthy political climate, wrought with skepticism and paranoia. Dystopias characteristically depict post-apocalyptic societies maintained by worst-case scenario governments. Readers vicariously experience a novel's worth of oppression and

ultimately, surface from the denouement, gasping for democracy and literally *conditioned* to fight for it.

As an English and Psychology double major, I am compelled by the dystopian author/reader dynamic. The novels of the genre that have garnered the most popularity and impact will comprise my study. A potential line-up includes Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), and Collin's *The Hunger Games* (2008). I am eager to study a collection that crosses the boundaries of nation and historical era in order to highlight the tenets of the genre. My thesis is grounded in two specific questions, one connected to the analysis of rhetorical devices and the other to B.F. Skinner's principle of operant conditioning.

My first research question: how do dystopian authors make their fictional worlds so vividly bleak that readers are instilled with the legitimate fear that the evil of the pages will spill out into reality? To explore this, I will focus on the form of the dystopian protagonist – the downtrodden proletariat man/woman. Unspectacular in every way, they are the most unlikely heroines, such as Orwell's Winston Smith whose name is as sexless only as his knobby leg, complete with a festering ulcer. Also, in pursuit of those qualities which make these tales feel so authentic, I will examine a copy of an original manuscript of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that contains the first draft. Interestingly, one of the primary changes that Orwell made between the first and final drafts is that he cut a massive amount of dialogue in exchange for third person narrative description. This is surprising because it breaks the golden rule of "show, don't tell." The significance of this to my question is that a lack of dialogue perpetuates a sense of isolation and dehumanization, the two components which I think are the most essential to the dystopian

formula. When I identify which literary devices dystopian authors use to convey these two ideas, I will have a possible answer to my first question.

My second research question: is it reasonable to suggest that dystopian novels condition readers to adjust their own political actions per the formal definition of operant conditioning? I expect to argue that it is. I foresee the possible counter-argument that for people to be conditioned, they must display a consistent response, and that the reactions of readers are highly varied and subtle. However, I would like to study the historical context in which each book was received and qualitatively gauge the effect that the novels had on readers of that time and place. Conceptually, my argument is supported by the logic of operant conditioning's subset, negative reinforcement. Operant conditioning may be loosely defined as learning by responding to stable consequences to specific actions. In particular, negative reinforcement involves the "teacher" first introducing some unpleasant stimulus and then motivating the "student" to change his or her behavior by removing the stimulus when he or she does as wished by the teacher.

A concrete example of this would be a parent who allows a child to leave time-out when the child stops pouting. The negative stimulus: time-out. The desired action: not pouting. Negative reinforcement applies to my thesis in this way. A reader is introduced to the negative stimulus, the concept of a society in which human rights extend as far as the mandate of a conniving dictator. As readers go along in the book, they are implicitly prompted to imagine ways that the characters could have prevented the formation of the nightmares they find themselves in. These are ideas such as the protection of freedom of speech, the sanctity of historical information, the necessity of art for the health of the human soul, and the importance of institutional limits to government power. As the reader pushes through page after page of this emotionally taxing experience, the author shines light on these ideas, and readers are rewarded for grasping the significance of these highlights with moments of relief. In such an instance, a

character may reunite with his or her humanity through the reading of a book, as Bradbury's Guy Montag does in *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). The readers, then, are conditioned to avoid political oppression by thinking of those concepts like art which gave characters and, transversely, *the readers themselves* relief within the dystopias they read.

My thesis will attempt to unite the English and Psychology disciplines to determine at what interval of effectiveness persuasion becomes conditioning. I have chosen the dystopian genre because its extremity of plot, character and rhetorical device make it the most likely branch of literature to revolutionize author/reader relations. Author of *Brave New World* (1932), Aldous Huxley, said, "My fate cannot be mastered; it can only be collaborated with and, thereby, to some extent, directed. Nor am I the captain of my soul; I am only its noisiest passenger." As is asserted by this keystone dystopian writer, humans are influenced by the external forces in their surroundings to such an extent that they are not truly the navigators of their own lives. So the question that I beg with my thesis is, how noisy can a book be?

III. SCHEDULE

Week 1 (March 30-April 5)

- Prepare poster for Stander Symposium

Week2 (April 6-12)

- Finish poster
- Read *Biopoetics* by Brett Cooke
- Collect data on human universality

Week 3 (April 13-19)

- Collect data on endings from across decades
- Especially, finish reading *A Handmaid's Tale*

Week 4 (April 20-26)

- Write conditioning section of thesis
- EXAMS

Week 5 (April 27-May 3)

- Write conditioning section of thesis
- EXAMS

Week6 (May 4-10)

- Finish conditioning section

Week 7 (May 11-17)

- Begin working on gathering more empirical evidence
- Studies of human universality, especially in reading

Week 8 (May 18-24)

- Continue human universality research

Week 9 (May 25-31)

- Consider how the other literary devices in these novels support the idea that characters are being dehumanized

Week 10 (June 1-7)

- Literary device/ other technique research

Week 11 (June 8-14)

- Literary device/ other technique research

Week 12 (June 15-21)

- Write literary device section

Week 13 (June 22-28)

- Write literary device section

Week 14 (June 30-July 5)

- Write literary device section

Week 15 (July 6-12)

- Write human universality section

Week 16 (July 13-19)

- Write human universality section

Week 17 (July 20-26)

- Conclusion/ Address overall gaps

Week 18 (July 27-August 2)

- Revise

Week 19 (August 3-10)

- Edit/ Fact-check

Week 20 (August 11-17)

- Submit completed draft to Dr. McCombe

Week 21 (August 18-24)

- BREAK

Week 22 (August 25-31)

- BREAK

Week 23 (September 1-6)

- BREAK

Week 24 (September 7-13)

- BREAK

Week 25 (September 14-20)

- BREAK

Week 26 (September 21-27)

- Revise within 2 weeks and resubmit a final draft

IV. Budget Request

I have no budget requests as all of the things I requested previously (such as reams of paper and books) were deemed to be accessible through other means. Using library resources has served me well thus far in my research.

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