

SPECIAL FOCUS
BOOK CLUB MATERIAL:
DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE

PRINTABLE GROUP GUIDE
WITH INFORMATION, DISCUSSION TOPICS
AND ACTIVITIES



1

WHAT IS A DYSTOPIA ?

A 'dystopia' is an imagined place or future where all is bad, unfair and miserable.

A dystopia does not have to be the far future. Some dystopias are set in the near-future and are developed from the normality of life today.

A dystopia does not have to be set in a new world. Some dystopias are set in a known country or location.

These terrible futures are most often as a result of a change in how society is organised, governed or controlled. Some may have been caused by an event.

All dystopias are characterised by an oppressive force on society.

This oppression is largely organised and maintained by a Government, a large Corporation, advanced technologies, and/or some sort of Dictator.

Despite various methods of control, the people within a dystopian society often *believe in the illusion of* perfection or happiness.

By contrast, a 'utopia' is the opposite; a perfect place or future vision where all is perfect and happy.

ACTIVITY 1

Tools required: A4 paper, pens, coloured pencils

Instruction: Using two blank sheets of paper, title one 'Dystopia' and the other 'Utopia'. Individually, take 5 minutes to draw your interpretation of each. What are the first things you draw? For example, will your dystopia be dark in colour with lots of buildings, and your utopia green with grass and blue with sky?

Discuss as a group, particularly focussing on what your drawing represents, why you chose those images, and where your drawings are similar. What has influenced you in popular culture and elsewhere to interpret dystopia and utopia in these ways?

WHAT IS DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE ?

Dystopian fiction uses everything about a ‘dystopia’ to create a setting and central themes within a novel.

Though fictional and imagined, these elements are often entrenched in the political, social and economic environment of the author at the time of writing.

Authors of dystopian literature are often using the medium to explore the ‘worst case’ ramifications of real-world political and social issues. In doing so, they are making criticisms about existing problems in society, organisations in control and systems in place.

Central characters in dystopian fiction are often trapped in some way, mentally or physically. Dystopian narratives may follow these protagonists as they seek answers for questions they have about social and political systems.

By following the perspective of the protagonist, the reader is led to recognise the flaws of the dystopian world in the book, and apply that understanding to elements in the real world.

ACTIVITY 2

Open discussion:

*What books have you read that are dystopian? How can you tell it is a dystopia?
(Is it the setting of the book, the themes of the novel and/or the quest of the characters?)
What films have you seen that are dystopian? How can you tell?*

WHAT MAKES A DYSTOPIAN SOCIETY ?

1. Control

In order to control their society, those in charge will enforce restrictions on the lives of their population. In dystopian literature, control will be clear in how the people spend their time, and whether there are any limitations to their liberties.

2. Conformity

To ensure the people comply with all restrictions, enforcement is an important factor. In dystopian fiction, manipulative methods and group mentality indicate a determination by those in charge to keep control. For example, to be individual is to be bad amongst your peers; propaganda posters reinforce key messages; surveillance will observe, identify and remove rejectors.

3. Fear of Others

To maintain control and conformity, the people fear the world outside their own boundaries or area. This fear is so embedded that they would likely not leave, even if they were allowed to. In dystopian fiction, this will be clear by way of physical walls and borders, or perceived divisions between groups.

4. Dehumanisation

For those in control to preserve the restrictive society that they have created, independent thought is restricted, controlled or altered. In dystopian fiction, this will be seen through characters struggling with their feelings or communication, and in scenes of mind programming and/or physical torture.

5. The Utopian Illusion

Those within the system believe in the system to such an extent that they are deluded into believing the dystopia is, in fact, a perfect utopian world. In dystopian fiction, this will emerge through a positive group mentality towards what the reader knows to be a bad environment for the people.

ACTIVITY 3

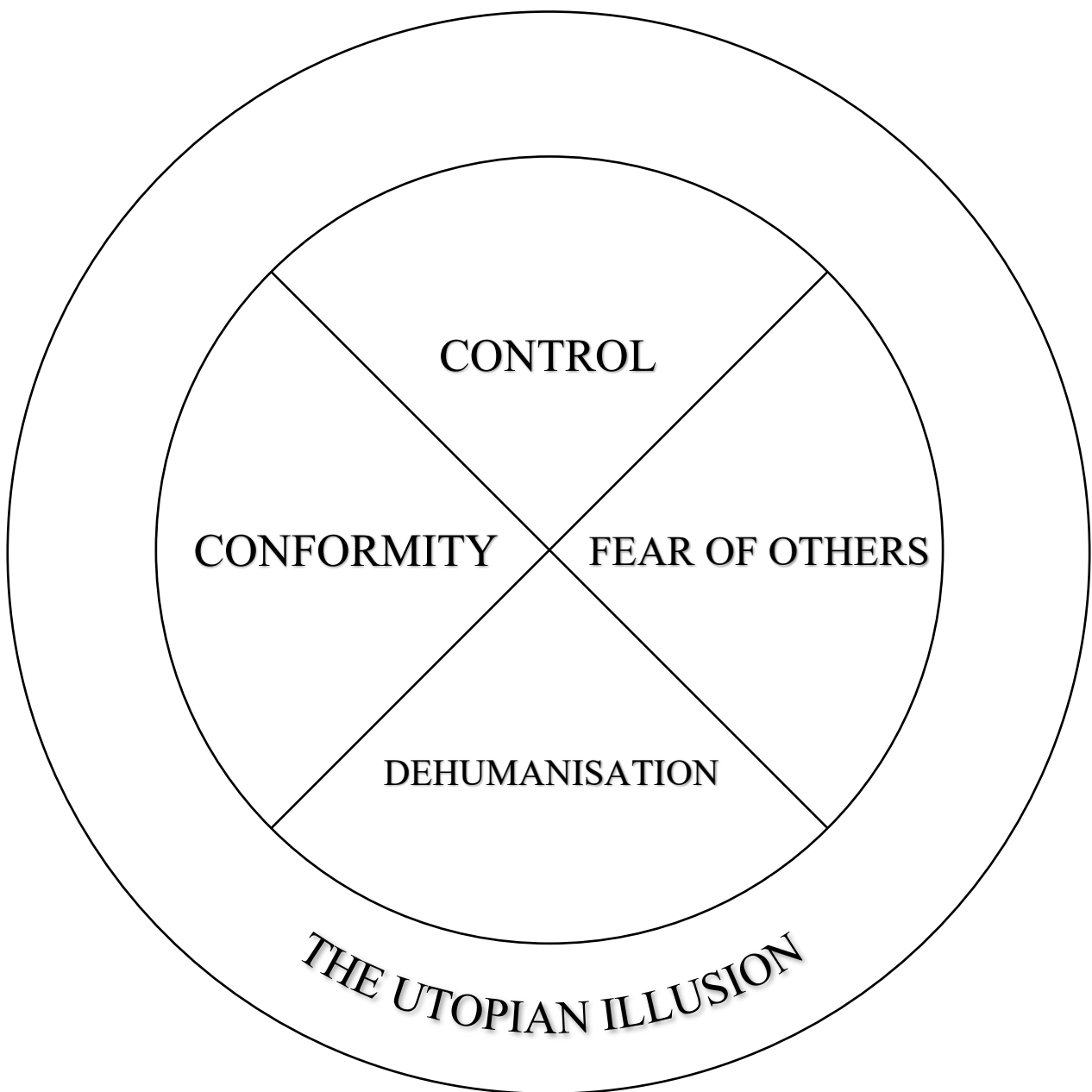
Pre-reading: For Brito! by RD Morris

Tools required: Flip chart paper / large board

Instruction: Using a large sheet of paper or board, draw one large circle split into four with an outer circle around it. Title each of the segments as the diagram shows below.
(To do this individually or virtually, print this page and write ideas into the segments.)

Discuss as a group, using sticky notes to collect examples from the text of how the author has applied each of the characteristics of dystopian literature.

Focus on how the author shows you the world is a dystopia.



WHAT CAN DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE TELL US ABOUT TIME, PLACE AND SOCIAL ISSUES ?

If dystopian literature is using ‘worst case’ ideas to comment on current social issues, it tells the reader about the world surrounding the author at the time of writing.

For Brito!, written in the years leading up to its publication in 2021, is a product of the time in which it was written.

RD Morris would have been influenced by the wider contexts of Brexit and Coronavirus, but the themes of eliminating waste, working efficiency and coming together as a nation can be interpreted against a backdrop of social division, the abundance of choice, online retail, social media, unemployment, pollution and more.

Nineteen Eighty-Four, often published as *1984*, was written in the five years leading up to its publication in 1949. It, too, is a product of the time in which it was written.

George Orwell would have been influenced by World War II, and the themes parallel the politics and rhetoric at war’s end, as well as delving into his views on totalitarianism, revolution and democratic socialism.

ACTIVITY 4

Pre-reading: 1984 by George Orwell

Tools required: Flip chart paper / large board, responses collected from Activity 3

Instruction: Complete Activity 3 again, but this time for 1984. Then display the two diagrams with the group notes next to each other.

Discuss as a group, particularly focussing on how the two compare. Focus on how the author has been influenced by the time of writing.

5

HOW DOES DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE

MAKE YOU FEEL

?

Dystopian literature is a warning of an imagined bleak future that has been caused by the real-world past and current.

Additionally, writers in this genre often explore wide, challenging themes:

- Humanity and the human spirit
- Philosophical questions
- Ethical questions
- Environment, pollution and population
- Human consequence

Some of the most powerful works in these areas are from the dystopian fiction genre. These have already survived the test of time, and their quotes are infamous.

ACTIVITY 5

Tools required: Paper, bag or container

Instruction: Individually, take 10 minutes to revisit both *For Brito!* and *1984*. On two slips of paper, write a quote from each of the books. Fold the paper and place it into a bag or container in the centre of the room.

Take turns to pull a folded piece of paper out of the container and read the quote.

Discuss as a group, particularly focussing on how each quote makes you feel as the reader.

Is it just a warning, or is it saying something more?

For fun, the group can guess the origin of the quote.

A DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE
READING LIST

A small selection:

For Brito!, RD Morris

1984, George Orwell

Brave New World, Aldous Huxley

The Handmaid's Tale, Margaret Atwood

Fahrenheit 451, Ray Bradbury

A Clockwork Orange, Anthony Burgess

The Children of Men, P. D. James

The Hunger Games, Suzanne Collins

The Running Man, Stephen King

The Lord of The Flies, William Golding

The Man in the High Castle, Philip K. Dick

Never Let Me Go, Kazuo Ishiguro

Animal Farm, George Orwell

The Giver, Lois Lowry

Divergent, Veronica Roth

Slaughterhouse-Five, Kurt Vonnegut

The Day of the Triffids, John Wyndham