

<b>Unit Title:</b> Dredging the Depths of Dystopian Despondency
<b>Time Frame:</b> Three weeks to one month
<b>Unit Developer(s):</b> Bryan Smith
<b>Developed for Course Name and Course Code:</b> ENG 4U Grade 12 Academic English
<b>Strand(s) and Curriculum Learning Expectations Addressed:</b> <b>Oral Communication</b> OCV.01U - Listening to Understand: listen in order to understand and respond appropriately in a variety of situations for a variety of purposes OCV.02U - Speaking to Communicate: use speaking skills and strategies appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes <b>Reading and Literature Studies</b> RLV.01U - Reading for Meaning: read and demonstrate an understanding of a variety of literary, informational, and graphic texts, using a range of strategies to construct meaning RLV.02U - Understanding Form and Style: recognize a variety of text forms, text features, and stylistic elements and demonstrate understanding of how they help communicate meaning <b>Writing</b> WRV.01U - Developing and Organizing Content: generate, gather, and organize ideas and information to write for an intended purpose and audience WRV.02U - Using Knowledge of Form and Style: draft and revise their writing, using a variety of literary, informational, and graphic forms and stylistic elements appropriate for the purpose and audience

### Desired Results

<b>Unit Description:</b> Students will read dystopian fiction to understand social issues and look at non-fiction analyses of the world as tools to understanding and systematizing their thinking about injustice, inequality and distortions of modern society. Students will engage in critical questioning of texts, value systems and world views in cooperative groups and share summaries of their discoveries.
<b>Enduring Understandings / Learning:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. While, the quest for perfection in society is fraught with dangers, it is nonetheless worth pursuing, though cautiously and respectfully.</li><li>2. Dystopian fiction uses satire to critique distortions in society in order to improve it. Thus critical thinking and its</li></ol>

expression are vital to society.

3. Dystopian fiction focuses on the fate of humans as social entities rather than as individuals in order to continue our species.
4. Respect for the rights of other human beings is fundamental to the continuance of our society, civilization, even species.
5. All sectors of society need to participate in imagining “a better world is possible” then act upon it.

### Assessment Tasks

#### **Performance Tasks and Other Evidence That Will Demonstrate the Knowledge and Skills Acquired:**

1. Discussion of dystopian novels in literature circles.
2. Classification of dystopian fiction into sub-genres with justification.
3. Notation of quotations from the secondary sources with justification of their pertinence to the novel’s picture of reality.
4. Essay on dystopian novel.

#### **Assessment Criteria:**

##### Knowledge:

- of characteristics of the genre and sub-genres as apply to their novel
- of one or more dystopian novels
- of one or more related, additional texts for use in clarification of their thinking

##### Thinking:

- Development of a meaningful thesis around a dystopian novel, i.e., supporting or refuting Dr. Connie Bray, M.Ed., and her thesis about dystopian fiction versus reality.
- Comparison and contrast of the events, characters and situations of the novel to the genre and sub-genre,
- Development and support of a logical argument for the dystopian novel
- Use of evidence in the form of quotations and paraphrases
- Use of Hegelian dialectic in the argument

##### Communication:

- Clarity of expression, accuracy of language
- Use of essay form to effectively describe, analyze and assess the novel and other text(s)
- Use of appropriate terminology to describe the dystopian society in the novel
- Use of appropriate terminology to describe the literary work
- Appropriate inclusion of both long and short quotations in the essay in MLA format

##### Application:

- Compares or contrasts the fictional events, characters and situations to current or historical ones

- Relates the work to personal or vicarious experience
- Relates the fictional universe to the concepts described in the secondary sources.

### Unit Planning Notes

#### **Prior Learning Necessary (if any):**

- It is helpful but not necessary that students have already read simpler dystopian novels like *The Scheme for Full Employment* by Magnus Mills, *The Chrysalids* by John Wyndham, *The Diary of a Spoiler* by Bill Bes, *Exodus* by Julie Bertagna, *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, etc.
- Students should be familiar with the concept of genres and sub-genres, the notion of classification and categorization.
- Students should be aware of literature circles, understand their theory and structure and the interdependence required by them, and preferably have practised them.

#### **Preparation Notes (if any):**

1. Assemble a selection of dystopian fiction so that each student can have a novel. It is best to have some extra copies or titles so that groups can be three to five people (See also attached “Pairing” sheet in Appendix 3).
2. For each dystopian novel, have a secondary resource to pair with it. (See also attached “Pairings” in Appendix 3 for suggested titles to match with the novels. Note that variations are possible both in the titles lists and the pairings.
3. Have a definition of the dystopian genre, of sub-genres. (See Appendix 2)
4. Have a brief history of the notion and title Utopia as well as of its etymology. A copy of the book or image of its cover and of Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon* may prove useful.
5. Have some popular film references to assist students in relating to dystopia as a genre, for instance, *The Clockwork Orange*, *V for Vendetta*, *Battle Royale*, *Wall-E*, *Sin City*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *Akira*, *Equilibrium*, as well as Utopian ones like *Lost Horizons*. Note that Utopia makes a less exciting film than a dystopia due to the lack of conflict in the former.
6. If introducing the genre for the first time in students’ high school experience, consider using a short story such as “Harrison Bergeron” by Kurt Vonnegut or from *Superflat Times* by Matthew Derby as a mentor or core text to explore with the whole class before beginning the reading groups.
7. Access to multiple copies of local and national newspapers can be an asset to students’ understanding of the nature of modern Canadian society.
8. You may want to have a sample button from The Syracuse Cultural Workers with the quotation “If you are not outraged.....” on it available to the class, or several for distribution throughout the unit. Source: [www.syracuseculturalworkers.com](http://www.syracuseculturalworkers.com)
9. Familiarity with OSSTF Resource books would be an asset. Suggested reading of OSSTF resources would include *Creating Spaces* and *Anti-Racist Education* as well as *Still Not Laughing* and *Learning Labour*. For descriptions go to [www.osstf.on.ca/resourcebooks](http://www.osstf.on.ca/resourcebooks)
10. You need not assume that one lesson is one class. Each is a focus for the learning. You may decide to have reading

time in class, work on a parallel unit including one that relates to a similar topic, or work on a unit where you need to do whole class instruction for a significant portion of the time to balance the independent and group work nature of this unit.

## Learning Plan

### **Lesson 1: What is Utopia? What is Dystopia?**

1. Introduce or re-introduce the notions of Utopia versus Dystopia, for instance, by asking students to imagine what a perfect world would have and would not have, would be like, and would not be like.
2. Compare these lists to John Lennon's "Imagine" then discuss how it seems easier to describe Utopias in terms of absence than of their content. You may also want to play the "Nutopian" anthem from Lennon's "Walls and Bridges" CD to clarify that how Utopia is defined by absence, since the 3 minute track has no sound at all.
3. Examine the origins of the term Utopia in Sir Thomas More's book where it means "nowhere", which student may decipher if given Samuel Butler's book title, *Erewhon*, the erroneous assumption that More meant it to be a perfect place, the relationship between "dysfunctional" and dystopia, thus the meaning of "dys".
4. Describe the entire task to the class regarding the reading of dystopian novels, the steps for the literature study. (See attached "Dredging the Depth of Dystopian Despondency" task sheet in Appendix 3.)
5. (Optional step) Read and analyze "Harrison Bergeron" by Kurt Vonnegut or another similar dystopian short fiction, in terms of the notion of equality that the society tries to enforce, the description of Harrison and the chief ballerina in terms of their deviation from the norm, and the cruelty of the devices used to maintain order in a society meant to eliminate cruelty due to inequality.
6. Display assembled dystopian novel selections to the class. These may be drawn from the list attached or from other sources, or from available titles in your school.
7. Talk to the class briefly about each title, perhaps relating it to a book previously read, to another author in the selection, to real events resembling those recounted in the novel, anecdotes about the author or indications about the movies available that are versions of the books or that have some relationship to them.
8. Allow students time to examine one or more books each based on their initial reaction.
9. Have students complete a rubric for book selection (See attached Rating Scale form in Appendix 1) then sign out their novel selections.
10. Assign some preliminary reading, some dipping into different parts of the novel, some thinking about whether they will commit to the novel or wish to change novels.

### **Lesson 2: Exaggeration, Social Criticism and the Limits of Satire**

1. Allow students to make any changes of novels at this point, suggesting that they be sure to have selected a book that they will continue reading.
2. Using recent and current newspapers, or accessing online news, have students brainstorm a list of problems in Canada and the modern world.
3. Select some of the problems for groups of students to examine. The members of these groups may be the same as

for a novel, or simply “elbow partners” by proximity when seated.

4. Pose the following questions: If this problem needs to be eliminated from Canadian society, how might we go about removing the problem? Who would be in favour of this change? Who would oppose this change? How would making this change improve Canada? What might be some negative results of this change? As an example, suggest that post-secondary tuition costs are a barrier to many students, and that therefore all college and university education should be free for all students who achieve over 85% percent averages in Grade 12. While students with high averages would approve, those with 84% in particular would find it unjust, as might taxpayers who find themselves paying increased education taxes for the benefit of young people. By educating the best and the brightest, Canada would maintain or improve its position in the knowledge-based economy. Conversely, this would do nothing to stop the drain of manufacturing jobs from the country. It might result, moreover, in jealousy and unfair competition among students, pressure to achieve 85% on students capable of respectable grades, or perhaps even the exclusion of some poor students who are economically disadvantaged and therefore less likely to have 85% in the first place. Thus it might aggravate economic distortions. (At this point, admit that the solution seems to have caused other problems, and put them to work on their problems.)
5. Have the students work to find a perfect solution to the social problem, one that would result in a Canadian Utopia. Students may decide, after working for a period time at trying to solve the problem without other negative impacts, that the task as posed is impossible. If so, congratulate them on their logic but comment on their pessimism about the future.
6. With a definition and examples, clarify the meaning of “satire” as a literary term for a genre and tone, the purpose of the genre, its subject matter, its use of humour and wit, its use of exaggeration and hyperbole, and its limitations. You may wish to compare it to roman à clef in that it often calls the country of origin of the author by a fictional name so that readers will have the shock of recognition of their homeland as the place where madness prevails, but contrast it in that particular people are not targets as such in satire, rather it is the values they represent. (See also discussion of satire and of related literary terms at [www.virtualsalt.com/satire.htm](http://www.virtualsalt.com/satire.htm) or elsewhere).
7. Describe the dangers of satire for the satirist when their exaggeration is misread as traitorous, hypercritical or the result of some personal disorder such as pessimism. Use as examples:
  - the accusations of treachery against Jonathan Shapiro of South Africa whose right to satirical cartooning has been defended by Peiter-Dirk Uys while he has been lumped with Bishop Desmond Tutu in the ANC as disturbing and in ANC Youth League’s view as disgusting. Sources “[South Africa's top satirist warns of censorship](#)” (*Taiwan News*) or “[SABC pulls Special Assignment doccie on Zuma, Zapiro](#)” (Mail & Guardian Online).
  - Examine the attitude of “America, Love it or Leave it” expressed during the debate over the Vietnam war by some elements of US American society, or use similar stories in the news.
  - Similarly discuss Mordecai Richler’s career as a satirist using key points from “Mordecai Richler: an Obituary Tribute by Robert Fulford” available at [www.robertfulford.com/MordecaiRichler.html](http://www.robertfulford.com/MordecaiRichler.html).
  - For accusations of satirists as hyper-critical individuals, i.e., whiners and complainers cite the onslaught by Nixon and Agnew against investigative American news media as “effete snobs” or against “liberals” by the Bush administration’s admirers.
  - For accusations against satirists as somehow ill themselves, consider the reaction to Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*.
8. Assign the reading of the first third or more of the dystopian novel as well as “En Route” task requiring that

students question the novel, thus imitating the satirist's questioning of accepted norms in society.

9. Assign the start of a graphic organizer for the novel consisting of a plot diagram, a mind map or an essay analysis and planning sheet to be used with each day's reading as well as in preparation for the group novels meetings, and after group meetings where clarifications or new ideas occur.

### Lesson 3: Questioning, Classifying and Clarifying

1. Display the secondary sources and ask the students to make the obvious relationships among these and the dystopian fiction, such as from a biography to a novel by Anthony Burgess, George Orwell or Aldous Huxley.
2. Allow students time to make less obvious links as well, for instance the character of Jimmy or Snowman in Crake's artificial paradise in Atwood's novel may become the "Dead Man in Paradise", the war between Gilead and other nations may be a "virtual war" and so forth.
3. Introduce some of the other texts and their authors briefly to the whole class, especially Stephen Lewis, David McNally and Michael Ignatieff, the last in so far as necessary for the students. Focus on Stephen Lewis work with the UN and now with the Stephen Lewis Foundation to alleviate suffering in Africa, although mentioning that one in attendance at a conference at which Lewis spoke criticized him as too depressing. Similarly, note that David McNally's book was the centre of a discussion group among workers in a car-plant in southern Ontario, which despite being about labour in Scotland was accessible to them, providing a framework to their thinking about a just society. As a way of meeting the various learning style preferences or needs of students, consider telling them that Stephen Lewis' Massey Lectures are available on CD as well as in print as *The Race Against Time*.
4. Introduce the term "heuristics" as a way of using a set of criteria to measure or interpret information knowing that there is a margin of error involved. Compare its literary use to its use in web design and computer applications.
  - Optionally, see also [www.usability.gov/methods/heuristic.html](http://www.usability.gov/methods/heuristic.html) for its application in the US Department of Health and Human Services, although some people asking questions about their health or anticipating surgery might be alarmed at the application of "rule of thumb" and "best guess" to the diagnosis of disease or the wielding of a scalpel.
  - Suggest that a heuristic might ignore historical periods and do a Marxist analysis of characters and events in a play by Shakespeare, not in order to say that the Bard was a proto-communist, but only that the way we understand society today, after Karl Marx, can help us relate to the conflicts in a previous era.
5. Explain to students that their purposes with the secondary sources may be several. They may choose to read the whole book or enough of the book to understand the entire way of thinking of the authors. This may be relatively short in the case of the books containing more than one text such as Stephen Lewis' where reading one lecture may result in a comprehension of an argument. This argument is then used to frame their understanding and discussion of the fiction novel.

Or

They may choose to skim and scan the book only enough to find one or more quotations which will help them understand the novel and argue for a particular viewpoint about it. In this case, the student has acquired some additional research, has more works to cite, and has an acquaintance with a book that could be read later.

Or

They may use the book as a heuristic, as a related work for a quotation or two, and as a source of pleasure.

6. Distribute the "Pairings of Dystopian Fiction and Secondary Sources" page (see Appendix 4) so that they can note that there are further suggestions, that discussion across groups may also be useful to them during their reading of



the novels, as follows: for instance between readers of *Ape and Essence* and *Brave New World*, as between readers of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* for obvious reasons related to the authors; but also between readers of *The Wanting Seed*, *Brave New World* and *Oryx and Crake* since both deal with ethics, population and theories about the crash of civilizations; between readers of Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* where female authors address what for them are dangerous aberrations in USAmerican society, between readers of *Exit to Reality*, *The Wanting Seed* and *The Road* since all deal with the collapse of the planet's ability to sustain its population; between readers of *Ape and Essence* and *Exit to Reality* since both deal with large numbers of people buying into a big lie.

7. Have the students meet in groups determined by their choice of novel to share their questions about the novel's setting, theme, protagonist, antagonist, minor characters, style, structure and tone; to answer each other's questions, and evaluate the complexity of the questions, the responses elicited and of the situations in the novels. Use the "Group Meeting #1" instructions (Appendix 3) to guide this meeting.
8. Give students definition of sub-genres of dystopian fiction or have them consult them on line in order that they categorize the novel they are reading. Note for them that while some titles being read by class members may appear in online articles, this identification may not persuade them or you. They should also question the analysis against the definition, even the web sites' authority.
9. Have students discuss Margaret Atwood's reported refusal to call *Oryx and Crake* "science-fiction" and suggestion that it is "speculative fiction"; similarly, report Cormac McCarthy's remark about "No Country for Old Men" but perhaps extending to *The Road*, as writing about the real world.
10. Assign reading of yet another 1/3 of the dystopian novel before the fourth lesson along with adding to their graphic organizer for the novel.
11. Assign reading of one or more secondary sources before the fourth lesson as well as a card on which they have noted the title of the secondary source, the authors, three quotations and their (degree of) relevance to the novel. If none are very relevant, however, they should choose other quotations or rethink their view of the novel.

#### Lesson 4 The Nature of Oppression or Oppression is Natural?

1. Have students form novel groups to compare the quotations they have found in the secondary sources, the reasons why they think these quotations are significant to an explanation of the novel's construction of reality or to reality as they perceive it, the evidence from the novel to support their theory about the interpretation of reality. Use "Dystopian Novels and Secondary Sources: Instructions for Group Discussions" in Appendix 5
2. Examine, in the novel groups, characters in the novels who are excluded from power or privilege, who are shunned by other characters, who are stigmatized and labelled.
3. In groups, then as a whole class, construct a list of oppressors and the oppressed in their novels.
4. Examine how oppressed, the oppressors and the means of oppression are similar or different from novel to novel. Expect a contrast between Ayn Rand and David McNally or George Orwell.
5. Examine how the oppressed, the oppressors and the means of oppression are similar or different among secondary sources.
6. Examine how the oppressed, the oppressors and the means of oppression are similar or different according to news media.
7. Examine how the oppressed, the oppressors and the means of oppression are similar or different from students' personal or vicarious experience.

8. Examine as a class the social issues raised by the fiction and non-fiction.
9. Discuss how or if the fiction reflects reality, “holds up a mirror” to society.
10. Discuss, analyze and debate the various models in the novels for the relationships among people from various places of origin inside or outside the boundaries of Ontario, race, professions, classes, genders, gender-orientations, value systems etc.
11. Have students list and critique the language used to describe those excluded. For example, who are the people who live outside the compounds in *Oryx and Crake*? What are they called? What does this name mean? How does this name indicate a lack of sympathy for them by other characters in the novel? What is the author’s intention with the use of this name? How is this classification of characters like the initial stages in bullying and genocide as described in Safe Schools materials or in accounts of the genocide in Rwanda by Senator Romeo Dallaire and others? Similarly, how are jokes or epithets used to exclude or victimize various people in the school and community?
12. Assign reading to the end of the novel and completion of the graphic organizer.

#### Lesson 5: An Argument about Reality or Essay means to Try

1. Review the discussions of oppression and exclusion from the previous lessons.
2. Have members of the novel groups compare and contrast the kinds of graphic organizers they used to determine if the kinds of questions asked, the constructions of reality imposed on the fiction or the assumptions behind the models affected their reaction to the novels, the kind of interpretation they derived from it, their perception of characters’ or the author’s intent. Use the “Visions of Dystopia: The Graphic Organizers’ Meeting” instructions in Appendix 5 to guide this discussion.
3. Have students in the novel groups re-examine the quotations from the secondary sources in order to select the most powerful that support their argument. Also they should examine quotations that disprove their arguments.
4. Introduce the methodology of Hegelian dialectic in argumentation where after the introduction of a thesis, the antithesis is introduced, discussed and used to help arrive at a synthesis which takes the argument to a higher level. Connect Hegelian dialect to the methodology of Marx’ analysis. (For a polemical and confused argument, but an excellent graphic model of dialectical argument see [www.nord.twu.net/acl/dialectic.html](http://www.nord.twu.net/acl/dialectic.html)). For a more rational discussion, see also sections 186 and 187 of Chapter VI of McTaggart’s *Studies in Hegelian Dialectic*, available at [www.class.uidaho.edu/mickelsen/Phil%20310/ToC/McTaggart.htm](http://www.class.uidaho.edu/mickelsen/Phil%20310/ToC/McTaggart.htm).
5. As a class do sample arguments based on Hegelian dialectic. For instance, free post-secondary education would be good for students, but would add to the tax burdens on the society. Nonetheless, since it would increase the economic status of Canadian society in the world, it would be a net benefit to all sectors of society. Or, Free pizza in the high school cafeteria daily would improve the eating habits of students who go without meals, but would mean financial ruin to the cafeteria. Nonetheless, since students would be more attentive and learn better, there would be less need for people and resources assigned to intervene with failing students, these expenditures could be redirected to healthy eating.
6. Have students submit complex sentences stating their thesis for the essay on the dystopian fiction for examination and approval. They should provide their graphic organizer, as well as the quotations from the secondary source as well. Note that the variety of opinions on the books, on the world and on the realism of Dr. Bray’s statement will be numerous. It is, however, essential that the students have a clear and defensible thesis statement for the essay.
7. Return the thesis statements with commentary and indications to students how or if they need to revise their thesis, even repeat step 6.



8. Have students complete a rough draft of their essay, paying special attention to the criteria listed in the categories of evaluation.
9. Have students exchange with someone who has read the same novel to edit for their use of the facts as contained in the novel and the secondary source.
10. Have students exchange with someone who has read a different novel to edit for clarity of its thesis, use of evidence to support the thesis.
11. Have students revise the essays.
12. Have students bring their completed essays to their novel groups to share the introductions and conclusions.
13. Have the students quantify how many agree with Dr. Bray's assertion that we live in a dystopia versus those who would assert that dystopia remain speculative fiction.
14. Have students discuss whether they think they can arrive a consensus about the conditions of dystopia to eliminate.
15. Have students discuss whether the elimination of dystopian conditions might harm anyone's rights in any way. Would the creation of a Utopian society be like Pol Pot's Cambodia where 2 million were killed.
16. Have students discuss if any Utopia can exist. Remind them that the etymology of the word Utopia, commonly taken to mean a perfect place, may mean that it does not, nor cannot.
17. Mark, comment on and return the essays. See achievement categories above for criteria to assist them and you.

### Appendices

1. Rating Scale
2. Sub-Genres of Dystopian Fiction
3. Group Meeting #1 Questioning the Dystopian Novel
4. Tasks and Pairings
5. Group Meeting #2 - Dystopian Novels and Secondary Sources: Instructions for Group Discussions
6. Group Meeting #3 - Visions of Dystopia: The Graphic Organizers' Meeting

### Other Possible Course Applications

- This unit could be adapted for use in an English course focussing only on Canadian literature by substituting all Canadian writers of dystopian fiction.
- Due to the scientific theories in several of these, portions of the unit could be done as part of the discussion of the ethics of science.
- In an interdisciplinary studies program with elements of Senior Sciences, Humanities and English, this unit could pull together several areas of study on Biology, World Issues, Sociology etc. Even elements of Ancient Civilizations could be blended if the theories around the disappearance of various ancient cultures are compared to the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic scenarios suggested in novels in this unit.