

UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA IN THE MAP OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

American literature shapes its narrative, form and ideology by the streams of historical events, political turmoil, land acquisition and conquest, civil wars and slavery. These very pivotal elements pertain to every theory or any literary criticisms that develop through time. Literature itself is timeless and universal but the birth of every literary criticism rejuvenates the perspective of preceding literary form itself. Utopia literature exposes the so called imagined perfect society where every realm of life is flawless. Utopia is just a notion of social depiction where high expectation is exercised and dreamt for. It is expressed as social critic at the same time where society at the time the utopia literature written is deteriorating or even crumbled. Dystopia, the derivative of Utopia sees it the other way around, it gives a reverse psychology consequence where everything is controlled and perfect would never be achieved. Dystopia criticizes Utopia for dreaming the dream of perfect society which the salient feature of dystopia against it. Dystopia gives us a clear understanding that our world in the future could be returned to the tyranny where the power of a nation relies on an evil leader. Dystopia seems relevant at the present even though it depicts the future society. Therefore, American literature embraces utopia and dystopia as American's effigy of today's life. The objective of this study is to trace, codify and comprehend the development of american's utopia and dystopia literature through some works that have been written to present us a tangible map of the utopia and dystopia streams of literature.

Keywords: *American Literature, Modernism, Post Modernism, Utopia, Dystopia.*

INTRODUCTION

America, the relatively newly invented continent, has been much

talked, discussed and even debated for its premise as the Promised Land for many. The wilderness and the

harsh when the first European first landed in the eastern coast of what's today USA was not even able to repel their vitriolic enthusiasm to find a better life, something that they believed had been promised and dictated by god in the bible. "The new world" they say is the epitome of their far reaching spirits and beliefs that in some extents have been shattered in their previous place. Ruland and Bradburry says "The new world was not new, nor virgin, nor unsettled. But arriving in historical daylight, sometimes with aims of conquest, sometimes with a sentimental visions of the "noble savages" or other wonders they might find, these settlers brought with them many of the things that formed the literature we now read" (Ruland and Bradburry 3-4)

Literature that becomes inseparable from the untold and told myth, traditions, legends and folks of American way of living indeed has given rise to the comprehension of how people look back to their history and even the future. American literature itself has emerged as early as the discovery of the continent even though it's not the Native American who reportedly wrote about their story but the European explorers who seemingly very enthusiast to jot down their nonfiction in the newly found land. Interestingly, the early American literature ever recorded was the manifestation and the intersection between the European renaissances mind and the wilderness ambiance of America itself and the combination of myth they brought from their previous land and all the things they acquired and experienced in the new land.

Most importantly the fact that "America" had established in the mind of European long before it was discovered needs to be wisely mentioned and considered. They had realized that there was a place out there that possesses the quality of "the promised land" which is more promising in every aspects, more exactly they thought that promised land as a better place than their current place which was full of wrath and havoc. Ruland and Bradburry say "... but at the same time the imaginary myths began to extend; there was, for example, sir Thomas More's famed *Utopia* (1516), which drew on Amerigo Vespucci's recorded voyages to picture an ideal future world" (6).

It sounds all utopias. Indeed it is, hence the European had mixed their fantasy and interpretations to form their definition of this futuristic place, moreover out of this vague thinking, there must have been a disappointment over the bitter reality that they found America was not like the Atlantis or Avalon or the seven cities of Antillean which built by gold and promising fountains of eternal youth, in fact the real America was so untouched, wilder and Weatherly horrifying. This disappointment had shaped how the European settlers describe, depict and write about their perks in their early settlement in the land. The journals they wrote basically about ways to survive in extremely dangerous weathers which they have never encountered before in Europe and how to cultivate the notorious barred land of America. The most obvious and clearly recorded remnants of the journals were about their pungent puritan beliefs.

Captain John Smith which is also known as the pioneer of European settlers who wrote about America signified his unexpected experiences in his record *A True Relation of Such Occurrences and Accidents of Note as Have Happened in Virginia* (1608) It was written a year after the first European's ship berthed in Virginia. The book tells about a plethora of myths, gallantry, venture, and the possibility of bumping up with native Indians which in some extends could be so insidious due to the lack of cultural and habitual comprehension for both sides. Smith also was the one who coined the term New England to refer the newly found land; particularly to affiliate the expedition of the Briton in the eastern part of what is today's USA.

Smith's mapping, both actual and written, of American possibilities continued. Sent by the Virginia company to explore the coast farther north, he gave it the name "New England," attached British name to many of its unsettled areas and recorded it all in his influential *A Description of New England* (London, 1616) – a reasonably accurate annals about the practical problems of travel, settlement and husbandry, detailing coasts, terrain, climate, crops and prospects for cultivation (Ruland and Bradburry 7).

Modernism and Post Modernism in American Literature

One of the most monumental features of Modernism is "The Lost Generation" which arose from the desperation of American young generation toward the world that shattered through the aftermath of World War I and II. Lost Generation is the term that was first coined by Gertrude Stein who said "You are all the lost generation" which referred to the youth that had lost interest in themselves and the nation as well. This generation had seen the world pessimistically and negatively due to the feeling of disorientation and disillusionment. Socially, modernism had been associated with degeneration of morality, a bunch of young people that having moral declination and spiritual degradation.

The representative of this era is a very well represented by T.S. Elliot whose epic poem *Wasteland* (1922) dubbed as the truly epitome of modernist literature poem. Elliot himself considered as the cultural agent to bridge America and British tradition in the early 20th century. He worked most of the time in Europe because he felt America was no longer an appropriate place for him to write due to the pessimistic tone he found in everyday life. But his works were so elusive and imaginative by asserting some seventeenth century metaphysical poets, he just looked back to the past for inspirations. Another prominent figure to represent modernism in America is Ernest Hemingway whose works are extensively acknowledged and won a Nobel Prize. Ernest Hemingway's code hero was "man can be defeated or destroyed physically but not spiritually" means man got the grace under the pressure. This literally

translated that every man can do their very best through some pressures and this pressure had them to harness whatever they have as a man. Ernest Hemingway's generations also implied the great depression after the World War I and regarded it as the appropriate time to heal them to be more aware of their surroundings.

Modernism reached its zenith by the contribution of the late prominent figures such as Gertrude Stein in 1946 and Sherwood Anderson in 1941. Still American could not get over from the war mode after Japan attacked Pearl Harbour in 1941 the entire life of American seemed revolved around the efforts to bring the normal life back. American fiction written by the authors such as Fitzgerald and O'neil heightened their literary highlights by exposing the canons of how American retrieved their life in the post world war II era. The postmodernism began when the modernism had started to rumble but postmodernism didn't necessarily halted modernism. Post modernism emerged as the reaction of dissatisfaction toward modernism. Once Hemingway said that "less is more" something that opposed by the Post Modernist Robert Venturi who said "less is bore". Of course this is the indication that post modernism favoured a very complex technique in doing the work arts. More precisely post modernism emphasized on diversity in creativeness.

In Literature the period of high modernism was the twenty years from 1910 to 1930 and one of the most influential literary works in post modernism is when German theorist Jurgen Habermas delivered the paper titled '*Modernity –an*

Incomplete Project'. "For Habermas the modern period begins with the Enlightenment, that period of about one hundred years from mid-seventeenth to the mid- eighteenth century, when a new faith arose in the power of reason to improve human society" (Barry, 82). This belief from habermas navigated us to see that post modernism has been rooted in long back hundred years because modernism had emerged as the predecessor of post modernism to take over the flaws that modernism ever created.

According to Tim wood "Postmodernism fiction can also be characterised by its transgression of the cultural boundaries erected between high and popular culture"(Wood 71). This literally means that postmodernism is actually bringing a closer look that there was a line between form of arts and literature. The consideration of the segregation of high and popular culture was marked by the consumer of the art. Some people enjoyed a very artistic kind of arts which followed certain standards that art should followed while another group of people enjoyed a piece of arts that felt closer to them, the art works that depicted the real predicaments of the world so they felt they had become a part of it. Overall, postmodernism still talked about the effect of gruesome war in the world. Once Malcolm Bradbury argues that

Though postmodernism is often seen as a break with representation and referentiality, it is clearly a fiction of the post war world and its crises and anxieties. There is no doubt than the second world war and the crises

or representation and responsibility it posed had a crucial impact on Sixties fiction, and fed its preoccupation with the modern unreality (Bradbury 209).

In some other sources, postmodernism in literary had always been associated with writer's self consciousness to make the work hardly understood through the style they utilized. This technique including mixing the high and low style in the same text such as: changing tone and point of view as well as logical sequence and register. The theme they picked also somehow showing peculiarity and absurdity and not rare displaying comical aspect and parody.

AMERICAN UTOPIA

Tracing back the history of American Utopia has been pretty much a riddle. Utopia which had been popularized by Thomas Moore in some extents displayed different characteristic of what American define their Utopia. It is not doubt that one of the driven factors of the development of Utopia genre in America is rooted from "American Dream" dreaming for a better society in the future. This dream had evoked people from British to vision a better place for human society where everything is in a perfect order.

The epistemology of the word 'Utopia' provides a reference point in understanding the Modern word 'Dystopia'. The term 'utopia', of course, notoriously embodies a pun; Sir Thomas more's coinage is deliberately ambiguous in its derivation. Its root may be taken as wither on-topos - 'no-place', or eu-topos - 'good place'. Utopia then,

may be defined as both a good place, and ideal (or at any rate, more perfect) society, yet at the same time one that does not exist - desirable, perhaps, but at the same time unattainable. "In utopian fictions this is reflected in the society's location, almost invariably remote or well insulated from the actual world to which it proposes an alternative" (Fern 2).

Coming back to American utopian novel, this genre had been emerged approximately in the late 19th century to the beginning of World War I that eventually embarked to mischievous, ubiquitous and unordered era. The main concern was obviously the desperation of after war effect and economic expansion, political disturbance as well. Utopian novelists in America highlighted the issue of political upheaval and the widening gap of social disparity between the rich and the poor. Another highlighted issue was immigration and the growing movement of women's rights. Surprisingly, Some utopian authors were themselves businessmen: King Gillette, inventor of the Gillette Razor and author 710 realist utopias 711 of *The Human Drift* (1894), Bradford Peck, the owner of one of the largest department stores in New England and author of *The World a Department Store* (1900), and L. Frank Baum, a travelling salesman with expertise in advertising and author of *The Wizard of Oz* (1900). This occurrence of having lots of utopian writers' who in the real life were also businessmen had also strengthened the major theme they were trying to expose: to compensate the unpleasant reality of the booming capitalism. Gillette and Peck believed that the intrinsic values of

the capitalism which possessed double side effects should be balanced by the effort to merge them into humanistic and spiritual values.

These utopian writers also emphasized on rejuvenating the spirituality and religiosity of the people to curb the moral degradation and social jealousy. Bellamy's *Looking Backward* registers the influence of his father, a Baptist minister, Donnelly's *Caesar's Column* parodies upper-class Protestantism in the name of a more just Christianity, Howells's *Traveler From Altruria* outlines an ideal Christian Socialism, and Baum's *Wizard of Oz* reflects his faith in Theosophy, which decreed "God was Nature, Nature God." These authors sought a religion free of sectarian quarrelling, readily applicable to ordinary experience, and open to Darwinian science (Bercovitch 711).

Utopian became critical in a point where the authors came from a very diverse backgrounds such as Africa Americans (e.g. Sutton E. Griggs, *Imperium in Imperio*, 1899), Jews (e.g. Solomon Schindler, *Young West*, 1894), and Irish (e.g. Ignatius Donnelly, *Caesar's Column*) – as well as numerous women authors. The basic tenet of utopia itself dwelled on the future's man desire to explore new things in unknown region, encountered with strangers and adjusted with the wilderness of the new area. This had been exactly the same with what first American settlers had experienced. According to Kumar, 20th century is the context where utopian ideals are seen as realizable, and satire "was joined now to the attempt to show, by as graphic and detailed a portrayal as possible, the horror of a society in

which utopian aspirations have been fulfilled" (Kumar 109). Kumar, through blaming the institutionalizations of utopian ideals for the chaotic conjuncture of the world during the first half of the 20th century, claimed that "exaggeration of contemporary trends was thought sufficient to present a fully rounded picture of anti-utopia" (Kumar 110).

AMERICAN DYSTOPIA

Talking about Dystopia would be very enthralling because of its nature in projecting the society in the future. What makes it different from Utopia is the strong appeal to the reader because dystopia keep depicting about the worsening society in the future that might happen or not. This appeal evokes the reader's reassurance about their present situation and their surroundings. Most of the time after reading Dystopia Literature reader will contemplate and deeply thinking about the society they live in. Most of the time dystopia society's rulers hide their main agenda behind they self-claimed "peace formula" reasons. Society in the future seems flawless and very orderly but it's only a ticking bomb or iceberg effect until the real havoc erupted by the predestined character that born to uncover the dirty shield.

Dystopia is not merely talking about the corrupted, ill fated society in the future, but also a very sophisticated society where technology plays a very important role in shaping the society. According to Keith Booker in his book *An Introduction to Dystopia Literature*, "Dystopia Literature situates itself in direct opposition to utopian thought, warning against the potential negative consequences of

arrant utopianism” (Booker 3-4). Booker also points out that one of the highlights of dystopia literature is defamiliarisation where it provides a completely new ambience and setting in the future that obviously will make the readers think out of the box. He says “the principal literary strategy of Dystopian is defamiliarisation: by focusing their critiques of society on imaginatively distant settings, Dystopian fictions provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable (3-4).

Most of the time there would always be an association between dystopia and utopia though it’s not wrong but still both shared different objectives. One of the prime objectives of dystopia literature is to remind the society about the most possible maybe the most horrible form of society in the future. It’s like an eye opening literature that will make the reader think about their future because for them the term utopia has failed to prove in some extends. As Mark Hillegas in his text entitled *feature as nightmare H.G Wells and the Anti Utopian* says: “dystopia by contrast, embrace history, affirms it, proclaims it, arguing that the same horror that have gone before can, and will, come again unless we learn to understand and prevent them. If dystopia could be said to have motto, it would be George Santayana’s wrist large- ‘those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,’ this means dystopian literature functions as a reminder aims at reminding us of the past to ensure that we don’t make the same mistakes again

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term dystopia initiatively was coined by British Philosopher John Stuart Mill in late 19th century. Utopia combined the Greek-derived eu ("good") + topos ("place"). Dystopia combined the dys, Greek word for "bad" or "negative" with topos. Thus, meaning "bad place". As some writers have noted, however, the difference between a Utopia and Dystopia can often lie in the visitor's point of view: one person's heaven can be another's hell. The oxford English dictionary defines dystopia as “an imaginary place or condition in which everything is bad as possible. Nanelle and David Barash say in *Biology, Culture and Persistent literary dystopia* “dystopias contain imagined societies in which the deepest demands of human nature are subverted, perverted or simply made unattainable.” Harley ferris then strengthen and added a different point of view about dystopia. He believed that dystopia is controlled by a group who possessed a private agenda to maintain their rule which often mirrors such real-world systems as communism, Apartheid, and the Roman Catholic Church. The controlling group regulates most aspects of the individual’s existence, everything from one’s daily routine to their family unit and career (2). Individual is not important as anything more than a part of the whole. As long as the status quo is maintained, the individual is typically safe, anonymous in the crowd.

Due to the elongated debate about when was actually this genre appeared, some critics believed

that worldwide recognition of this genre was appeared in 1960's, initiated by Chad Walsh's seminal study, *From Utopia to Nightmare* (1962). In his work, Walsh used the term *dystopia* from J. Max Patrick who used it in 1952 in his anthology written with Glenn Negley entitled *The Quest for Utopia: An Anthology of Imaginary Societies*.³ Walsh was firmly believed that Dystopia had overshadowed the optimistic hope of utopian to find a better society in the future, instead it's all oppressed, subjugated, corrupted and all the badness of the failing state. He also insisted that the pessimistic tone of dystopia had marked by the disillusionment where he says that the shift from utopian to dystopian fiction is important. He saw this paramount elements of the shift as a phenomena that there would never be a perfect society, if there are any, there must be defined by some elite who hold the power.

American Dystopia in the other hand had been remarkably recognized by the young people due to its visionary and revolutionary ideas of gruesome society and the presence of a hero or main character that mostly represented by a young distinctive personality who is somehow born pretty different from the rest and had a huge responsibility in their shoulder to save their society. *The Giver* (1993) by Louis Lowry revolves around the life of a chosen young boy named Jonas whose duty assigned for him is very rare and prestige, that is as the receiver of the past memory of human civilization. The society where he lives is the society where emotion attachment such as love and hate were derogated. As the result people never

feel what love is and less emotive. This is due to their belief that by having zero emotion it would create less harm. Jonas at the end had to discover the truth behind this hidden memory.

The Diamond Age or A young Lady's Illustrated Primer (1995) is a post cyberpunk novel written by American Author Neal Stephenson. This Dystopia tale follows the life of girl named Nell in a society that is ruled by nanotechnology. The author explored the themes of education, social class, ethnicity, and the nature of artificial intelligence. Another profound contemporary American dystopia literature is *The Maze Runner* (2009) by James Dashner which emphasized on the psychological testing toward some youth that quarantined in a place surrounded by a deadly maze that guarded by the monstrous spider-like robot. This group of young people had their own duty once they were being placed in that small society. One of the duties was as the explorer of the puzzling and deadly maze or labyrinth so that they could find the way out.

Ray Bradbury even wrote the monumental work and claimed as his most successful piece of work adored by many. He wrote *Fahrenheit 451* and published in 1953. His forecasting of future society can be channelled and felt strongly to the present as the main tenet of his stories is sort of different with the typical dystopian tenets. He instilled the fear of the ruling government over the growing intelligence within the people caused by books. So the government decided to wipe all books with the hope that

the government can control the people easily.

The Road (2006) by C. McCarthy depicts the horror and vicious look of future America where earth is devastated by not only corrupt government but also hazardous bio chemical weapons, civil wars and terrorism. Margaret Atwood, a Canadian writer might be very true in imagining the future society through her dystopian novel. She wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1985 where she criticized the totalitarian Christian government for being too Ultra-Puritan. This brings us to the understanding where Puritanism in America once a very pivotal element in the history making of USA but could deteriorate its' own values and teaching caused by ultra-tyranny leader and mislead society. Atwood brings the issue of subjugated second class citizen so called women who barred from gaining intelligent and if fertile enough are used to be breeding machines. Few decades later Atwood wrote another staunch work which titled *Oryx and Crake* (2003) highlights about the looming disparity in American society where "The Have" gains most and "The Have not" suffers a lot. The dystopia element could be traced in the punch line of outlawing the poor to have a very limited access to everything and favouring the advancement of ultra-technology for the sake of human kind.

The trilogy of *Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins might be one of the paramount dystopia novels ever written in the American history. After a success interpretation in the movies, *Hunger Games* keeps dictating every upcoming dystopian works to be at least voicing the

struggle of the oppressed classes. Depicting the oppressed classes and the most favoured class in a nation called *PANAM* which readers felt that this has a strong relation with Pan- America, *Hunger Games* presents us with the Gladiator-Story Like where the warriors taken by every districts except the capitol where all the most affluent people reside have to bloodshed their last blood to be the champion tribute. Every year the eligible citizen from 12 districts has to undergo the screening process through a tribute selection. Whoever selected will compete in the main arena in the capitol where White, the president of *PANAM* continuously remind his people that this game is a tribute for those who died in the civil war. This explains us the characteristics of the dystopian literature revolves around the future society which might be crumbled or about to due to the tyranny system of the ruling government.

Every American dystopian avid reader must be so keen in comparing *Hunger Games* with Veronica Roth's Trilogy of *Divergent*. Both of the leading characters in the novel are women and have undergone series of oppression in their respecting district or faction. Taken place in the future Chicago city, *divergent* offers us with a very stable situation at first, it is indeed very utopian. The faction system the founding father created has received no objection, but the growing fear of the ruling party over the characters who fit into all traits : Amity (the peaceful), Abnegation (the selfless), Dauntless (the brave), Candor (the honest) and Erudite (the intelligent) or simply call the *Divergent*, corrupt their souls and

eventually swipe out every divergent or whoever doesn't side with them. *Tris*, the main character managed to erase the faction system to be factionless where everyone who possesses the entire trait or even those who don't fit into any traits can live peacefully.

CONCLUSION

These dystopian literatures mentioned above shared some strong similarities such as division of classes in the society and the assigned job for each individual. A corrupted and totalitarian government also highlighted. Another major similarity is the depiction of high science technology things that had been used as the tool to maintain and control the power. Class struggle has been very obvious in the entire dystopian works. The protagonist of class struggles have naturally varied, through the ages, from freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild master and journeyman, to bourgeoisie and proletariat in the epoch of capitalism. But throughout, 'oppressor and oppressed' have 'stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstruction of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes (Marx 68). Obviously, the characters like Katniss and Tris had brought the spirit of revolution for the whole nation. They might have not been recognized before but their spirits against the culprit is eventually noticeable. Brooker says "Dystopian literature is specifically that literature which states itself in direct

opposition to utopian thought, warning against the potential negative consequences of arrant utopianism". This means dystopian literature emerged as the alternative to criticize the existing ruling government that totalitarians can't coexist with the growing democracy and open system in the future.

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