



# A Comparison of Dystopian Nightmares and Utopian Dreams: Two Paths in Science Fiction Literature That Both Lead to Humanity's Loss of Empathy

Alisha G. Scott, Antioch University

## Abstract

Science fiction literature has long dreamed of extravagant utopias and dreaded nightmarish dystopias. Authors from the birth of the genre to more current times find the erosion of empathy to be the downfall of either extreme form of society. On the one hand, George Orwell's tyrannical climate of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and the punitive society found in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) may seem very different from the hedonistic faux-paradise of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and the fallen society of Margaret Atwood's utopia-turned-dystopia in *Oryx and Crake* (2004). However, whether a fictional world is allowed to go too far into utopian dreams through drug use, hyper-sexualization and the like, or whether it is all repressed into a dark authoritarian regime, members of each societal type undergo a loss of empathy which eventually becomes the downfall of civilization. It is notable as well that in both novels where science progresses rapidly without the check of ethics, such as H. G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), and in literature where androids or modified human beings become too advanced for mankind to keep in the confines of a lawful society, such as Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968), it is the lack of empathy that causes death, destruction, and/or social disconnection and psychopathy. Though the pleasurable aspects of utopian classics and the unpleasant facets of dystopian books appear at first to be polar opposites, they similarly portray collapsing societies that have lost their sense of empathy.

**Keywords:** *utopia, dystopia, science fiction, empathy, emotion, ethics, humanity, socialization*

Upon first glance, oppressive totalitarian regimes and worlds fueled by mindless hedonism seem to be at opposite extremes of the science fiction spectrum. However, both utopian fiction and dystopian fiction present two separate roads that eventually lead to the same erosion of interpersonal connection and empathy. From early science fiction like H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* to Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, the dulling of characters' pro-social emotions is a key component of the genre and carries important implications for real world societies.

Anaïs Nin, in *The Novel of the Future* (1986), questions and discusses the initial reasons why authors choose to write science fiction from a social point of view. She argues that, in this age and going back just beyond the turn of the century, "we are fearful of looking inside of ourselves" and takes the broad view that "nations have neuroses as do individuals" (Nin, 1986, p. 29). Indeed, there is much discussion in the literary community over the ways in which science fiction has come about as a sign of the times while technology continues to advance rapidly. The often alienating nature of life

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in a modern, industrialized nation has led to a lack of interpersonal contact that Kafka often depicted in his work and came to describe as “the nightmare of man’s anonymous cities” (Nin, 1986, p. 167).

Such a sentiment is backed up by renowned social critics like Jeremy Rifkin (2009), who notes that many people living in the modern world are fueled by either faith in God and the belief that salvation awaits after death, or the capitalistic conviction that “a material utopia lay just ahead on Earth” (p. 317). Rifkin doesn’t shy away from analyzing the effect these trends have on the individual in society, concluding that the greater one’s sense of isolation, the less one can emotionally connect with others, which, in extreme circumstances, will lead one to either rage against others or to turn inward in self-inflicted social withdrawal (2009, p. 120). Many speculative fiction authors write about these extremes and follow the nightmares through to their darkest conclusions. Science fiction, in that sense, can be read as a societal safeguard, or an attempt to show negative and frightening possibilities of the near future so that they become a part of society’s collective consciousness in hopes of preventing such nightmares from becoming a reality.

Much early science fiction deals with the notion of scientific pursuits being carried on without any restraint regarding its greater consequences or ethical considerations. H.G Wells showcases this age-of-reason type of utopia in some of his early works, such as *The Invisible Man* (1897). In this classic novel, *The Invisible Man* is seen as a freak to the people of the village in which he arrives. The masses reflect an invasive type of curiosity, with Wells using the language, “cried everyone,” to describe the entirety of a crowd calling for him to be captured against his will (Wells, 1897/2014, p.

48). *The Invisible Man*’s humanity quickly erodes as he realizes he is an outcast who cannot truly survive in the normal world anymore. He discovers that the few people who will accept him warily want to use him to commit crimes and for their own selfish needs. Fed up with society, he lashes out at the public and goes on a rampage “breaking in the windows in Coach and Horses, and then he thrust a street lamp through the parlour window of Mrs. Gribble” (Wells, 1897/2014, p. 75). Once again a fearful mob forms, “shouting in the street[...] bolting into houses and slamming doors” (Wells, 1897/2014, p. 90).

*The Invisible Man* seeks out the scientist, Dr. Kemp, where he is initially treated as a miraculous discovery whose “freedom should be respected” (Wells, 1897/2014, p. 106). However, Dr. Kemp quickly recognizes how *The Invisible Man*’s increasing psychopathy has atrophied his common sense. This is described as “rage growing to mania” as Dr. Kemp speculates about what *The Invisible Man* might eventually do (Wells, 1897/2014, p. 110) and concludes that not even he can aid such a broken individual.

Dr. Kemp can be seen as a representation of the ethical safeguard against potentially dangerous new technology; *The Invisible Man* serves as the symbolic obsession with progress, skipping past all ethical considerations, and he ends up becoming disturbingly fanatical and sociopathic until his eventual murder. Science fiction critic Mark R. Hillegas (1967) describes this high price that *The Invisible Man* pays for his dangerously experimental pursuit of science as the “loss of all human sympathy” (p. 38), and even goes as far as to say that he is a “perfect symbol of a science without humanity” (p. 39).

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In a similar vein, Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) chronicles the life of a secluded scientist carrying out experiments on a hidden island in order to turn animals into humanoid creatures. While Dr. Moreau shows a certain amount of protective care and nurturing towards his creations, this attitude is hauntingly contrasted by the amount of physical pain he inflicts on fellow life forms. In fact, before retreating to his island, journalists had described him as "wantonly cruel" with his work going against "the conscience of the nation" (Wells, 1896/2016, p. 32). He seems to think of his torturous surgical procedures as a simple bump on the road towards reaching his scientific goals, saying that pain "is such a little thing! A mind truly open to science must see that it is a little thing" (Wells, 1896/2016, p. 76.) Hillegas (1967) sums this up well in stating that "Moreau's activities foreshadow anti-utopian nightmare states where rulers, free of all ethical considerations, employ biological, chemical, and psychological conditioning in order to maintain total control over their citizens" (p. 37). The Beast Folk, as Wells names Moreau's creations, are symbolic of dehumanized people. They are treated with cruelty and condescension, living by sets of "laws" determined by Moreau that echo cult-like religious beliefs, such as "His is the hand that wounds. His is the hand that heals" (Wells, 1896/2016, p. 61). While they try to adapt to the imposed pseudo-civilized lifestyle, they tend to revert back to feral states unpredictably. They have been tortured and maimed, brought together unwillingly to form a society that they can't quite understand, and are often fearful and quick to lash out in rage. They describe themselves as often struck by the desire to "kill and bite, deep and rich, sucking the blood," so they follow Moreau's strict vegetarian diet and rules for living together because they know that "It is bad" to behave savagely (Wells, 1896/2016, p. 63).

This fragile arrangement can be seen to represent the possible outcome of a society becoming overly reliant on scientific pursuits and ruled by logic rather than ethical considerations. When citizens are forced to advance in rapid scientific leaps without regarding their individual and collective human rights, the nightmare becomes one of suppressed rage, fear, and eruptions of violence. The society falls apart because it has not taken into account empathy for its inhabitants, and as Nin (1986) points out, this trope is "an expression of schizophrenic insensitivity, a need to feel things violently because the sensitivity is atrophied" (p. 35). In fiction, science is often divorced from ethics and leads to the same conclusions: humanity must keep empathy alive or else it risks its members unscrupulously turning on one another.

Following Wells's later, more typically utopian novels, Aldous Huxley was inspired to write a reactionary novel that would show a much darker possible future than was popular in fiction at the time. Huxley wrote *Brave New World* (1932) to showcase what would happen to society and its individuals if they existed in a "hedonistic ersatz paradise[...] where absolutely everything is a consumer good and human beings are engineered to be happy" (Atwood, 2011, p. 148). Noted contemporary speculative fiction author, Margaret Atwood, refers to this strange utopian shallowness as a society which encourages one to "wallow in pleasures" (2011, p. 148). On the heels of the industrial revolution, *Brave New World* allows the reader a glimpse into what the world would be like if everyone were genetically engineered specifically for their jobs and stations in society, and chemically kept content with their position. The heavy emphasis on consumerism is perhaps a reaction to the boom in capitalism around the time of the industrial revolution, when anything

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seemed possible and industrialized nations were experiencing significant growth and advancement.

Huxley also seemed to pick up on early hints of the sexual revolution, poking a bit of satirical fun at the idea of recreational sex taken to its utmost extreme. Sex in *Brave New World* is no longer about relationships, families, or procreation but, rather, has become a universally-defined normal social activity lacking any deeper meaning other than simply physical pleasure. Past notions of monogamy and love held standard by “pre-moderns” are described as “wicked and miserable” urges that “didn’t allow them to take things easily, didn’t allow them to be sane... forced them to feel strongly” (Huxley, 1932/2006, p. 41). It is understood that through “feeling strongly (and strongly, what was more, in solitude, in hopelessly individual isolation), how could they be stable?” (Huxley, 1932/2006, p. 41).

People in this futuristic society have replaced these emotions through a cinematic experience dubbed the “feelies” in order to take a pleasure-inducing drug and experience pleasant emotions during these films, filled with sexual scenes, slapstick comedy and propaganda to promote consumerism and its shallow values. This feel-good drug, Soma, leads the viewer to describe even violent, action-packed scenes as “almost intolerable galvanic pleasure” (Huxley, 1932/2006, p. 168).

When people die in this society, there are no bad feelings, as there are no family ties or deeper relationships with others. They have been robbed of empathy and all of their emotional focus is geared towards being happy with their position in life and enjoying hedonistic pleasures rather than meaningful pleasures such as love and connection. Aging is carefully controlled, involving balancing hormones and preventing diseases, metabolism stimulation, and other procedures to

create the experience and appearance of “Youth almost unimpaired till sixty, and then, crack! the [sic] end” (Huxley, 1932/2006, p. 111). Interestingly, however, to prevent people from inward withdrawal and, perhaps, to keep them from reflecting on how hollow their lives are, being alone is taboo. Superficial yet constant social interaction is highly encouraged and being too unique or desiring alone time is entirely unacceptable. This keeps the society conditioned to work together to produce and consume in an endless loop, and ensures that no one strays too far from the mold by offering constant means of superficial pleasure and enjoyment. After all, this is a world where people are seen as disposable because they can “make a new one with the greatest ease” and those in charge firmly believe that “unorthodoxy threatens more than the life of a mere individual” (Huxley, 1932/2006, p. 148).

Huxley’s utopian nightmare here is not so much one of isolation, but as the outcome of forced socialization and the near-impossibility of an option to withdraw and reflect, or respond in rage. Noted psychology professor and founder of a branch of neuroeconomics studies, Paul J. Zak (2012), has written extensively about the ways in which the bonding hormone oxytocin encourages people to connect emotionally and physically by rewarding the brain with positive feelings. He states that a “fixed idea” of “rational self-interest” can lead to “deeply entrenched abstraction” and halt the positive evolutionary traits that otherwise come along with social connection (Zak, 2012, p. 189). *Brave New World* showcases this idea terrifyingly well, as the reader is shown the lack of empathy and how people have turned solely to pursuits of self-interest such as constant shopping and orgiastic sex. The drugs this society takes produce feelings of comfort and pleasure, but there is no

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deeper emotional interconnection with others or reflection on the self, and the reader is likely to see this as not much more than a pointless, meaningless existence.

Social thinker Rifkin (2009) points out the flaw in the idea of creating a “perfect” society stuck in stasis and void of negative feelings by simply stating that “empathy does not exist in utopian worlds, where suffering and death are eliminated” (p. 345). While dystopian literature is often the first subject to come to mind when one speculates on what a world without empathy might look like, utopian literature takes a different road but ends up with the same frightening conclusion. Rifkin (2009) notes,

The empathic impulse is an acknowledgement that each life is unique and therefore precious, that all living creatures are vulnerable, subject to pain and suffering, and eager to be and thrive. Empathy smacks of mortality, is oriented by the smell of death and is directed to celebrating another’s life. (p. 345)

Huxley’s now famous utopia presented in *Brave New World* conditions the fear of death out of humans when they are very young, attempts to take away pain and suffering through chemical means, and takes the eagerness to experience life away, only to be replaced by a genetically-designed sense of contentment. All of these conditions add up to create the classic that is still commonly listed as one of the greatest books of the 20th century. People continue to eagerly read *Brave New World* because it speaks to what could happen if the world tried too hard to create social perfection. The answer remains the same: once empathy is gone, true fulfillment becomes impossible and a hollow existence is all that is left in the wake of such strict social engineering, even when it seems

geared toward peace and pleasantries. A society where members are designed to get along, perform their designated tasks, and exist in a consistently happy state leaves too much room for members to flee and become outcasts or cruelly turn on the individuals who do not fit the high expectations for social perfection.

In stark contrast to the hedonistic surface-level utopia featured in much of Wells’s and Huxley’s work comes George Orwell’s widely-read classic, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Written shortly after *Brave New World*, Orwell’s novel opens without the pretense of a perfect or even peaceful society. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* dives straight into the dark, seedy underbelly of a world stuck in constant war, haunted by invasive government surveillance and under totalitarian control with brutal consequences for those who break the law. The government’s three party slogans are chillingly: “WAR IS PEACE,” “FREEDOM IS SLAVERY,” and “IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH” (Orwell, 1949/1961, p. 4). This society is so far beyond the basic human rights one equates with democracy that the tyrannical Big Brother even sets to work history revisionists, so that not even the past is safe from manipulation and brainwashing. The world of Oceania depicted in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has become a common reference point through the ages, coining phrases and ideas that continue to remain relevant in social and political discourse. In Oceania, strict militaristic law and conformity are prized above all. Loving relationships are forbidden and replaced entirely with loyalty to the state. As literary critic Daphne Patai (in Bloom, 1987) puts it best,

The novel itself, after all, may be viewed as a demonstration of the incredible coercive forces that need to be brought to bear upon human beings to reduce them to their worst possible

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selves: the constant spectacle of hysteria; the sanctioning of the intimacy of pain, fear, and hatred and the prohibition of the intimacy of friendship and love; the continual material deprivation; the impediments placed in the way of genuine thought. (p. 63)

Patai takes this idea further, citing how Orwell's nightmare society used games to indoctrinate children into strict modes of behavior (in Bloom, 1987, p. 63). Such conditioning is the exact recipe for turning normal human beings into fear- and anger-based people on the verge of complete psychopathy. Rifkin (2009) explores this idea in his writings on what it means to be human, stating that teaching empathy is "the substance of human morality— [leading to] responsibility for one's actions... and a proper sense of fair play and justice. The maturation of empathy and the development of a moral sense are one and the same thing" (p. 119). By gearing children's play towards specific games that are designed to mold them into submissive members of a repressive regime, it effectively suppresses and hinders the development of empathy for a lifetime. Dissenting members of Oceania's society are punished for having behavior or even thoughts that do not toe the party line, and in this way empathy is treated like a persistent cockroach infestation: it is constantly being exterminated and any traces left are immediately stamped out. As a fearful character describes, going against society brings the Thought Police and, "It would not matter if they killed you at once. To be killed was what you expected" (Orwell, 1949/1961, p. 103).

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the reader is shown what happens when citizens of the state act subversively. The protagonist, Winston Smith, falls in love with Julia, a young woman who acts in

conformity but hides her secret desires for sex and other forbidden aspects of human nature. When his "thoughtcrime" of being in love is discovered, Smith is tortured for "inner disloyalty to the state" (Atwood, 2011, p. 144). He is so broken down that he gives up Julia in order to save himself from unthinkable pain and agony. What remains is a sad shell of what can hardly be called a human being anymore, as Winston becomes brainwashed into fully believing "two and two make five and that he loves Big Brother" (Atwood, 2011, p. 145). Orwell continues to haunt the world's psyche as his work is read in homes and classrooms across the world, powerfully showing society the nightmare it must avoid at all costs. Even in modern politics, when the U.S. National Security Agency was found to be spying on American citizens, much of the public seemed to collectively cry out: "We will not stand for Big Brother in our world." In this way, not only does Orwell show society the danger of a dystopian world, but he safeguards society by giving people the language and the images to express objection when those in power seem to have taken their positions a bit too far beyond the lines of democracy and the people's given human rights. Atwood notes this when she explains, "with the notorious 9/11 World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks in 2001[...]Now it appears we face the prospect of two dystopias at once—open markets, closed minds—because state surveillance is back again with a vengeance" (2011, p. 148). This chilling idea is felt throughout the collective consciousness of America even more than a decade later, as the ghost of Orwell seems to loom above to remind humanity to stay on the path of empathy and human connection, and keeps trying to correct when freedoms are taken away and fear-mongering politicians insist on more power and stronger punishments. However dark and harrowing

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Orwell's dystopian novel is, it serves the function of reminding humanity that not all hope for civilization to survive is lost until all empathy is lost.

Several years after Orwell's nightmare first gripped the world, Kurt Vonnegut published the novel *Player Piano* (1952). Vonnegut took on the theme of automation arising in society as more and more assembly-line and factory jobs became mechanized following World War II and the economic stability that came after The Great Depression ended. Inspired by the idea of a world where the working class has no employment opportunities left, *Player Piano* differs from earlier science fiction nightmares in that "Vonnegut's [nightmare] seems closer to [be]coming reality as we may come to know it" (Hillegas, 1967, p. 162). Indeed, it is easier in the new millennium to picture machines replacing much of human work than to imagine a whirlwind Orwellian nightmare where totalitarian regimes spread to the point of destroying humanity. Hillegas (1967) also notes that, "It is not, however, science itself which is the villain in *Player Piano*, but the development and application of the technology, which has proceeded lawlessly without consideration of its effect on human life and human values" (p. 162). Hillegas proceeds to classify this novel as an anti-utopia, rather than a dystopia, for not all is lost to complete tyranny.

Issues arise when, as in much of Wells's earliest work, progress is valued over ethics. Displaced workers are forced to live in The Homestead, a mass housing unit where they get by, but at the cost of a purposeless, meaningless existence. The citizens are described as moving "with an air of sheepishness and, as though there were nothing but time in the world," (Vonnegut, 1952/1999, p. 24). Their emotions have become dulled because

they have nothing to contribute anymore, effectively becoming a society of outcasts. Many are so brainwashed by the idea of progress in the novel that it ends with only an attempt to overthrow the system, as the masses haven't the free-thinking ability to realize they are part of an oppressive society, where their emotions have been conditioned and paranoia replaces empathy. This is shown by acts such as one citizen "going around town with a shotgun, blasting nothing but those little traffic safety boxes" (Vonnegut, 1952/1999, p. 330) and "wrecking practically everything" material (Vonnegut, 1952/1999, p. 336) in order to lash out at the lack of meaningful work due to automation. The people in this society have destroyed so much that they feel their work is done because they had dealt "a savage blow to a close little society that made no comfortable place" for the individual (Vonnegut, 1952/1999, p. 340). However, the novel then closes abruptly on arrests and the authorities rather calmly asserting that "This isn't the end[...] nothing will ever be—not even Judgement Day," (Vonnegut, 1952/1999, p. 341). This implies that the near-collapse of their system will simply be brushed over as the same authorities remain in power.

Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) was published around the same time as Vonnegut's anti-utopia, and depicts a disturbing world where empathy has been ripped out of the cultural psyche. Through techniques of dialogue, physical descriptions, as well as direct actions and consequences, Bradbury follows Montag's growing empathy while continually reinforcing the lack of it in both his personal life and his world as a whole.

Bradbury utilizes both dialogue and physical descriptions of characters to demonstrate the way in which empathy has deteriorated into a culture dominated by self-interest. When Montag begins

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to first experience the birth of empathy inside of himself, he looks at the firemen “whose faces were sunburnt by a thousand real and ten thousand imaginary fires, whose work flushed their cheeks and fevered their eyes” (Bradbury, 1953/2013, p. 31). He describes their “charcoal hair and soot-colored brows and bluish-ash-smearred cheeks[...] The color of cinders and ash about them, and the continual smell of burning from their pipes” (Bradbury, 1953/2013, p. 31). This symbolically shows the reader that the firemen and the fire are one force: destruction. Montag then reflects on that and realizes, “These men were all mirror images of himself” (Bradbury, 1953/2013, p. 30). He suddenly begins to feel a surge of empathy for the man whose library they had recently burned, and learns that the victim was forcibly committed to a mental asylum. Beatty, head of the firemen, replies, “Any man’s insane who thinks he can fool the government and us” (Bradbury, 1953/2013, p. 31).

This one exchange creates a macrocosm where Montag is described as one of the many affectless firemen, except that now he is beginning to experience empathy for the first time. He then goes on to explain this to the others, stating, “I’ve tried to imagine just how it would feel. I mean, to have firemen burn our houses and our books” (Bradbury, 1953/2013, p. 31). The lack of empathy present in Montag’s world is reinforced further when the firemen respond simply that they don’t have any books, and then immediately accuse Montag of harboring literature himself. The instant denial and accusation serves as a reminder of how dangerous it is for Montag to develop empathy in a world of psychopaths, as well as showing the reader that the oppressors themselves are willing to kill a member of their own team without much thought, should he simply appear subversive.

The character of Millie, Montag’s simple-minded wife, provides ample opportunities for Bradbury to show through dialogue and physical descriptions how Montag’s own personal microcosm reflects the society without empathy as a whole. When Montag brings home books secretly, Millie violently protests until they reach a book with the words “That favorite subject, myself” (Bradbury, 1953/2013, p. 68). That is the one sentence she can understand out of everything, and she becomes interested in books only when that line is read to her. Montag then remembers the strange young girl he met at the beginning of the novel, and replies “But Clarisse’s favorite subject wasn’t herself. It was everyone else, and me. She was the first person in a good many years I’ve really liked” (Bradbury, 1953/2013, p. 68). This exchange shows that Montag is suffering in his home life because he is beginning to learn what empathy is and to feel it inside of himself, while his wife is presented as only thinking of herself in all interactions. This is later reinforced when Millie calls Montag “silly” after he asks her if she loves him. She then casually redirects the conversation and suggests that Montag kick a dog she doesn’t like (Bradbury, 1953/2013, p. 73). The cruelty of the remark is of little surprise to Montag, however, as Millie had already mentioned to him that she often takes the car out in the middle of the night to speed recklessly, ending with the chilling statement, “It’s fun out in the country. You hit rabbits, sometimes you hit dogs” (Bradbury, 1953/2013, p. 61).

Millie’s circle of friends provides another wonderful vehicle for Bradbury to showcase the psychopathic tendencies deeply ingrained into Montag’s society as a whole. This group of gossipy women visit Millie frequently and openly discuss their children as objects to be ignored, stating things such as, “You heave them into the ‘parlor’ and turn on the



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switch. It's like washing clothes; stuff the laundry and slam the lid" (Bradbury, 1953/2013, p. 93). They also reveal that their political leanings are based solely on arbitrary traits and hollow status symbols: they all voted for the man with good looks, a fancy sounding name, and even brought up the fact that the opposing candidate had been seen picking his nose (Bradbury, 1953/2013, p. 93). Furthermore, one of Millie's friends hauntingly describes the complete lack of empathy within her marriage and the casual attitude they all share towards war in a conversation where she explains, "Pete and I always said no tears, nothing like that. It's our third marriage each and we're independent. Be independent, we always said. He said, if I get killed off, you just go right ahead and don't cry, but get married again, and don't think of me" (Bradbury, 1953/2013, p. 91). It is no wonder that Montag looks at them and thinks, "They were like a monstrous crystal chandelier tinkling in a thousand chimes, he saw their Cheshire cat smiles burning through the walls of the house..." (Bradbury, 1953/2013, p. 89). Once again, Bradbury is able to use physical description and dialogue to cleverly mirror Montag's shift of consciousness as he becomes more empathic.

Another method Bradbury uses to demonstrate an emotionally impoverished society is through direct actions and consequences. One strong example of this is found in the Hound, a mechanical creature which seems from the very start to be programmed to only dislike and threaten Montag. The Hound is a machine designed in the image of an attack dog, except that it has eight eerie spider-like legs and a needle-tipped proboscis which injects its victims with an enormous amount of strong painkillers. The other men in the firehouse participate in a hobby where they sit around and loose stray animals such as cats for sheer amusement value.

The Hound does not kill them, interestingly, or even cause physical harm at all. Instead, its attack produces a surge of heroin-like euphoria in its victims. It pacifies them and makes them feel artificially blissful. The firemen then take the body of the animal and throw it into the incinerator. This process is repeated and referred to as a "game" for when "nights got dull" (Bradbury, 1953/2013, p. 22). Montag, being the only fireman the Hound growls at and stalks, starts to develop empathy for the living, breathing creatures which are treated as objects to be discarded for amusement.

It becomes clear later in the novel that the Hound was programmed by Beatty to constantly threaten Montag. However, The Hound isn't a symbol of the threat of death alone; it implies something even more disturbing. The Hound is a looming reminder that not only will Montag be killed if he develops empathy, but that in his final moments, his own empathy will be stolen away from him. Should the Hound catch Montag, Montag would not get to die with his sense of justice and outrage intact; he would be artificially drugged into a feeling that mimics pure happiness, and then incinerated in that state. Bradbury is showing the reader that not only is this society capable of brainwashing people into obsessive self-interest and killing them if they dissent, but they also will go as far as to chemically manipulate people out of empathy. The fact that the Hound does this the moment before death, instead of simply injecting them with lethal poison or a heavy tranquilizer, is a very subtle yet deep message on Bradbury's part. It shows that the culture will take away empathy simply out of principle, for no practical purpose.

Beatty uses the Hound as the final weapon against Montag, and the Hound pursues Montag until the climax, where it is described on the news that

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the “Mechanical Hound never fails. Never since its first use in tracking quarry has this incredible invention made a mistake” (Bradbury, 1953/2013, p. 126). This is a hint to the reader that many before Montag have developed empathy and subsequently been tracked, drugged into a false emotional state, and then killed. Bradbury is emphasizing that this culture is not simply oppressive and murderous. This is a world where those in power will go to asinine lengths, such as inducing bliss right before death, just to make sure that it’s not simply the person that dies; empathy itself is what the firemen are focused on killing. The subversive emotional state is stripped away from people’s minds and happiness is physically forced into them by a robotic predator. The person’s body is then treated as a defective object which is “tossed into the incinerator” (Bradbury, 1953/2013, p. 22). The Hound is a masterful symbol on the part of Bradbury, showing just how psychopathic the world around Montag has become, as well as how incredibly dangerous cultivating empathy is for Montag and others like him.

Bradbury’s writing is able to depict clearly and viscerally just how important empathy is in order for a society to function healthily. Empathy serves as “an ethic for living. It’s a means of understanding other human beings—as Darwin and Ekman found, a universal language that connects beyond country or culture. Empathy makes us human” (Pink, 2006, p. 165). The eeriness of the Hound’s euphoric needle, the hollow values of Millie and her social circle, Montag’s naïve struggle to explain to the other firemen that he is starting to wonder what it would feel like to have his belongings burned— all of these elements come together to paint a masterfully dark picture of what a society without empathy would look like, and Montag has

convinced generations of readers that it is a value worth fighting for at all costs.

It would take a few years for another science fiction writer to come along and present some very dark, yet poignant, views of the future from a more high-tech standpoint. Philip K. Dick never shied away from viewing the future as a potential nightmare. Perhaps his most widely read novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), raises the question of whether robotic beings embedded with memories are actually feeling their emotions or are simply acting out their elaborate programming (Atwood, 2011, p. 133). Furthermore, it spurs the question of not only what makes us human, but also what would happen if such genetic programming were available to the masses. Atwood, like many other speculative fiction authors and critics, believes that “Our achievements won’t be ‘ours’” and things will quickly go awry if the day comes when “we won’t have to strive for mastery” (2011, p. 133).

Visionary author and critic Thomas M. Disch (1998) breaks down the reasoning behind Dick and other authors writing about robots and artificial intelligence. He states that “the robot has been a dramatically effective emblem of the possibility that a machine could think, thereby usurping what was supposed to be a human prerogative” (p. 214). He also argues that, “Better than any SF [or, science fiction,] writer of his time, Dick understood that science fiction is not about predicting the future but examining the present” (Disch, 1998, p. 91). This concept is crucial when it comes to understanding the progression of science fiction through the ages, from early utopias to classic dystopias, all the way up to newer offshoots of the genre such as cyberpunk or steampunk. Science fiction authors tend to pick up on the current trends in not only

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science but every aspect of culture including government control, genetically altered food, and questions about up and coming technology. Disch goes on to describe this finger-on-the-pulse phenomenon as causing the reader to develop “a kind of double vision, savoring the wilder flights of fancy but aware, all the while, of the authors’ direct hits on contemporary targets” (1998, p. 91).

Philip K. Dick suffered from a severe mental disorder that colored his fiction with strange elements and made life extremely difficult for him. His own struggles to understand reality and his psychotic breaks gave him a persistent need to write about what is “real” and how things can be seen from so many different viewpoints. However, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is a finely focused novel that was turned into a film before Dick’s own death, and has caused millions of people to understand the conundrum inherent in asking what it is that truly makes us human. Dick debuts in his novel the protagonist Rick Deckard, an official bounty hunter for replicant androids. The major moral dilemma of the book is the fact that these androids are so close to human, physically and in terms of free-thinking capabilities, that it is nearly impossible to tell them apart from organic human beings. The government had originally created these androids in order to have them serve on Mars. However, they quickly became so close to human that widespread fear they might take over saw them banned from Earth and hunted down to be retired. They are never referred to as being killed, although on the outside they appear so human that it is highly disturbing when an android is finally discovered and “retired” (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 31). The word choice here causes the reader great distress in imagining what it would be like to be a programmed, yet feeling, creature on the run from humankind. Deckard himself thinks of it in the

chillingly and ironically opposite manner, musing, “Empathy... must be limited to herbivores or anyhow omnivores who could depart from a meat diet... Evidently the humanoid robot constituted a solitary predator” (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 31).

Interestingly enough, in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, the crux of the decision on whether a being is human or android is the Voigt-Kampff Empathy Test (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 29). This measures purely a being’s empathic response—and throughout the novel, as in many other science fiction greats, being human in an age of high technology is determined by whether the being can feel empathy or not. The test measures how quickly a being responds empathically, as the androids have become so intelligent that they can easily fake a response; thus, often the test results come down to simply the tiny delay in time when a subject elicits a response. This not only causes great doubt in the accuracy of the test, but also brings up the issue of beings that turn out to actually be human but lack the proper empathic response or simply hesitate for other reasons. The reader is shown how difficult it is to measure empathy at all, since the scale of human emotions is large and such a data-reliant test cannot ever be one hundred percent accurate.

Perhaps the most distressing moment in Dick’s novel comes when Richard Deckard is sent to retire a well-known opera singer, Luba Luft, who is supposedly confirmed as an android. The use of Mozart’s opera, *The Magic Flute*, blends in thematic brilliance with Deckard’s growing dilemma: he is confused about what is right and what is wrong, and he is starting to believe that he has an attraction to certain female androids. He becomes distraught over the idea that he loves opera, and Luft must genuinely love opera

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as well since she has taken a very public position and risen to fame with the San Francisco Opera (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 97). *The Magic Flute* can be seen as an allegory to the optimistic ushering in of a new era where humanity can progress and flourish in enlightenment. This stands in complete dissonance with Deckard's society; his love for the opera and his interest in Luft seem to serve as the final break-down of the barrier in his mind between human and machine. It appears that sharing such a deep connection and love for beautiful art derails Deckard's stone-cold demeanor and begins his mental decline. He himself lacked empathy for androids, beings which he can no longer truly tell apart from humans, and that caused his morals to decay. Stirred by Luft and Mozart's work, he suddenly begins to feel pangs of empathy as he can connect with Luft's ambition and the inherent bravery in continuing her art in the face of deadly persecution.

Throughout the novel, Deckard is fueled by his desire to own a real, live animal. He dreams of getting a goat to take care of, which is an impressive sign of a higher social status in Dick's vision of Earth. It implies that, while there are replicant animals one can buy and take care of and they act exactly the same, humans are holding on to a strange definition of what makes something "alive" and "valuable" and whether or not it has rights based on that idea (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 8). In the end, Deckard finally achieves his dream and buys a goat using all of his bounty money, only to have his scorned android lover, Rachael Rosen, return and kill the animal. Deckard, sadly, cannot seem to understand the reasoning behind this, the desire to cause him the same pain he has caused others, to try to force him to feel empathy for what it's like to lose a companion being so suddenly and so easily. He understands that it was not "needless,"

but thinks to himself that she had "an android reason" for doing such a thing, and nothing more (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 227). It is only until he finds a toad, thought to be extinct, and takes it home to his wife excitedly only to discover that it is indeed a machine, that he finally seems to feel full-blown empathy for the androids. Deckard explains to his wife, "[...]it doesn't matter. The electric things have their lives, too. Paltry as those lives are" (Dick, 1968/1996, p. 241). This small blip of feeling from the perspective of an artificially intelligent creature is a breakthrough that ends the novel on a vague yet hopeful note for the future of Deckard and his world.

International bestseller Margaret Atwood brought to the speculative fiction genre a mix of utopian and dystopian ideas. Her writing style and biting humor have garnered great acclaim, from her early work to her fallen-utopia-turned-dystopia novel, *Oryx and Crake* (2003/2004). The first book in this speculative fiction trilogy, *Oryx and Crake*, follows protagonist Jimmy, later known only as Snowman, through two separate timelines. The past timeline is more utopian, but shadowed by the knowledge that civilization will soon collapse around Jimmy, making for an eerie mix of progressive ideas and a flourishing world, while the future timeline shows Snowman as perhaps the last member of the human species, as genetic engineering has run rampant and destroyed many natural animals and a great number of people through a super-virus.

The character of Jimmy is a slightly cocky, often moody teenage boy with test scores that get him into the least prestigious college available, a decrepit art school called Martha Graham Academy. Meanwhile, his best friend from high school, Crake, is an enigmatic genius who gets sent to the top school in the country, the Watson-

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Crick Institute (Atwood, 2003/2004, p. 173), where the reader eventually discovers he is working on highly secretive genetic research. At first, the Watson-Crick Institute appears to be a complete utopia. Young, brilliant minds have their every whims catered to amidst a sprawling campus where students have designed dazzling glowing flowers and everything appears to be a paradise. Jimmy eventually learns that Crake is working on a classified bioengineering project, which is not unusual for the Institute. They have already created creatures such as the “Rakunk,” a splice between a raccoon and a skunk that can be kept as a pet, and the “Pigoon,” a disturbingly human pig-splice that can grow extra organs for humans and do away with the need for human organ donors (Atwood, 2003/2004, p. 202). On the surface, this appears to be great scientific progress. Jimmy and Crake are both also lucky enough to grow up in the corporate-sponsored “Compounds,” an upscale suburban paradise that young Jimmy’s father compares to the dwellings of kings and dukes of medieval times. Jimmy’s father explains to him as a child that the Compounds are like castles, which “were for keeping you and our buddies nice and safe inside, and for keeping everybody else outside” (Atwood, 2003/2004, p. 28). This begins to highlight the sharp class and ideological divide between those working for the corporations, in near-utopian settings, and those stuck living in the outside world where the black market runs rampant and life is nowhere near idealistic.

However, in the future timeline where Jimmy is known only as Snowman, he sees every sign of the idyllic past destroying the planet. A super-virus has wiped out humanity, and all that is left is a race of engineered beings Snowman calls the “Crakers,” who have safeguards built in against the now angry and wild Pigoons and other dangers of the new

world. For instance, the male Crakers have the job of peeing in a circle around the campsite to keep predators away (Atwood, 2003/2004, p. 154). The Crakers purr like kittens, making their simplistic emotional states easy to read, and all the Crakers participate in consensual group mating rituals which eliminate the difficulties associated with monogamous pairing (Atwood, 2003/2004, p. 165). They have been perfectly engineered to survive in the post-virus world, and the reader comes to find out that this is exactly what Crake intended and discovers by the end that he indeed was the person who created and spread the virus right as the Crakers were ready to be released into the new world.

Snowman is wracked with guilt throughout *Oryx and Crake*, since he understands that his seemingly menial job working in advertising helped spread ideas that the masses followed, and helped lead to the near-extinction of mankind and ravaging of the natural world. Snowman is a broken man because he has empathy, however stubborn and cocky he was when he was simply youthful Jimmy. He understands not only his own small contribution, but how much at fault Crake is for destroying humanity.

Snowman has become an outcast from the cushy yet secretly destructive world of the corporate Compounds, and he is forced to wander alone in the woods in the future with no other humans. His mental process constantly dwells on his outcast state, forcing him into thoughts such as, “Get me out!” and then reeling and realizing, “But he isn’t locked up, he’s not in prison. What could be more out than where he is?” (Atwood, 2003/2004, p. 45). Snowman is trapped in the outside world that he is not prepared for, emotionally or in terms of physical survival, and he weakly fights to stay alive while

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his mind deteriorates from isolation and a sense of deep remorse and disillusionment.

Crake, on the other hand, early on appears to have a sociopathic-level of disconnection from emotional attachments. He is constantly presented as being aloof, dismissive, and purely logical. When Jimmy first begins to hang out with Crake in their teenage years, Jimmy's mother describes the eerie sense that "Crake was different, more adult than a lot of adults" (Atwood, 2003/2004, p. 69), referencing his emotional detachment and focus on conversations about objective topics. The reader finds out eventually that Crake had spread the deadly virus through a sexual enhancement pill he created, which became widely popular due to its euphoric results and birth control properties. Crake appeared to have seen that progress was wildly veering out of control, as genetic engineering was replacing nature and he could see the dystopia that would become hell on Earth once humanity went too far in that direction. He decided instead to engineer a new race, a peaceful and child-like people who are naked and happy, and to end the human race so that they might have a chance.

This interesting mix of character strengths and flaws causes a strange reaction upon reading. While Crake may have been right about Earth teetering on the brink of dystopia and trying to salvage the planet for a new race, the fact remains that he committed genocide on nearly all of the human population. He had no empathy whatsoever for other humans, and in fact always seemed to loathe them deep down and use them only for his end goals and purposes. Snowman has great empathy, is wracked by guilt and memories flooding back to him, and barely has the will to live by the end of the novel. He seems to notice this clearly for the first time in a retrospective memory told from

when he was still known as Jimmy, on a particular after-school day when Crake tells him that he never remembers his dreams. The novel jumps forward into future Snowman's head and the reader is told, "It is Snowman that remembers them instead. Worse than remembers: he's immersed in them, he'd [sic] wading through them, he's stuck in them" (Atwood, 2003/2004, p. 218). He is powerless and he knows that he, too, played a role in the downfall of humanity by continuing to advertise and spread propaganda about progressive new products and genetic alterations that he knew even at the time would not lead humanity down the right path. Jimmy is flawed for his empathy and yet lack of action until it is far too late; Crake is flawed for his lack of empathy and pre-emptive action before it was far too late.

Atwood's narrative feat in taking the reader from the past with Jimmy, to the future with Snowman, showcases different sides of the utopia/dystopia coin. Neither is purely good nor bad, but the reader is allowed to see how a society that appears on the brink of perfection, similar to Huxley's *Brave New World* where blissful hedonism and happiness seem abundant, can quickly go awry and turn into a nightmare when progress goes on unchecked by ethical considerations. Atwood herself explains this concept in one of her essays from *In Other Worlds*, where she emphasizes the importance of story-telling in order to keep humanity in check. She states that "artistic capabilities would of necessity be evolved adaptations, acquired during the roughly two million years the human race spent in the Pleistocene as hunter-gatherers," and further explains the importance by relating, "if you could tell your children about the time your grandfather was eaten by a crocodile, right there at the bend in the river, they would be more likely to avoid the same fate" (Atwood, 2011, p. 43).

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For over a century now, science fiction authors have been imagining what possible crocodiles humanity could soon create in the form of robotics, bioengineering, government control, new pharmaceuticals, and many other potential, soon-to-become-reality advancements. Anaïs Nin (1986) describes this genre, whether it is dystopian or utopian speculative fiction, as using concrete images to represent “abstract psychological truth” (p. 125). Indeed, this is an age where science will continue to shape many novels to come with

symbolism and themes to make humanity think about where progress is taking society and what the possible outcomes could look like (Nin, 1986, p. 196). As long as writers and artists continue to take the dreams of today and show people their potential conclusions, or turn them into nightmares where progress has gone greatly awry, a great service is being done to keep the world remembering the importance of empathy and human connection above all else.

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