

Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* imagines a plague which all but wipes out the human race. What is the appeal of dystopias in literature?

Dystopia is one of few literary genres that never falls out of vogue. Though Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* is widely accredited as 'the first' modern dystopian novel, if the idea of dystopia were to be stripped from its modern connotations and defined simply as 'an imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible'<sup>1</sup>, with the term quite literally being derived from the Greek *dys-* ('bad') and *topos* ('place'), then we can find numerous examples of this condition being met in novels far preceding Zamyatin's opus. The English philosopher John Stuart Mill coined the term in 1868 when denouncing oppressive Irish land policy, and the term's roots have undeniably contributed to the political inflection of dystopian fiction. Dystopia is, at its core, a mechanism for political freedom: freedom to express through analogy what cannot overtly be said, and the freedom within the narrative to construct a new meaning and world order once all social expectation has been stripped away. This sense of imaginative liberty connects directly to the Romantic conviction that art and intellect can act as forces of transformation.

Dystopia is a creative tool for liberation, enabling critical engagement with the concept of power and fostering intellectual resistance. Totalitarian regimes often breed dystopian literature precisely because intellectual freedom is curtailed and creative expression is censored, prompting artists to explore their own subjugation through the very art they are denied. The very act of writing a dystopia, then, becomes a form of rebellion in and of itself where creativity is a threat to the status quo. Where education does not encourage emancipatory thought, readers of dystopian fiction can be taught the possibility of agency through being able to freely question the ideology of fictional regimes and relate them back to the power structures under which they operate. Susan Watkins, Professor of Women's Writing at Leeds Beckett University, sees dystopias as spaces within which to process anxieties through transformation, offering imaginative freedom to envision alternatives, stating that 'if you can engage with the protagonist who's coming to realise their own place in the situation that's being created, questioning and challenging that, then you can work through those same issues as they apply to you.'<sup>2</sup> This echoes the Romantic preference for reflection and self-revelation as pathways toward moral and social renewal.

Many dystopian novels present collapse as paradoxically liberating, such as Zamyatin's *We* (1920–4) in which the rebellion of the protagonist, D-503, becomes an act for reclaiming the human soul against the imposition of mathematical perfectionism by the One State, or Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), in which two worlds of contrasting political ideals are both critiqued but voluntary cooperation is nonetheless seen to have emancipatory powers. In *Parable of the Sower* (1993), protagonist Lauren Olamina develops a new belief system called 'Earthseed' in a crumbling 21st Century America as a symbol of regeneration and survival. In today's world, the genre appeals to many - only consider the commercial popularity of Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008) or the critical reception of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) - as a safe imaginative outlet for exploring both personal and societal freedom where these are being increasingly infringed upon by digital surveillance culture and a worldwide shift to the political right. Justin Scholes connects the evolution of the Young Adult dystopian fiction to its appeal among adolescents who are 'beginning to understand their own potential for independence and action within a larger community'<sup>3</sup>, channelling the biological desire for independence at this age to a manifestation of political curiosity and thirst for intellectual freedom.

Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) engages with ideas of freedom through the often ironized lens of the sole survivor. Unlike many dystopias, which may appeal to a reader via a vicarious freedom against oppressive systems, *The Last Man* portrays an extreme freedom: one which is cumbersome and ultimately dehumanising. Shelley critiques Romantic ideals of personal liberty (influenced by the likes of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and her own husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley and by the anarchic spirit sparked in the late 18th-early 19th Century Europe by the French Revolution) much as *Frankenstein* had already questioned the Promethean drive of the isolated genius, and shows how unchecked freedom can create the opposite, a restriction that dries the creative spirit when divorced from human connection. The protagonist, Lionel Verney, embodies a Romantic notion of untamed 'freedom...[and] companionship with nature'<sup>4</sup> in the beginning of the novel, yet, 'romantic' as these notions are, 'they [do] not accord with the love of action and desire of human sympathy.'<sup>4</sup> His 'boasted independence' becomes a 'tyranny' of the self, imposed onto all else without regulation.'<sup>4</sup> The fragility of political freedoms celebrated by the Romantics is exposed by Shelley, whose exposure to radical politics via her parents Godwin and Wollstonecraft undoubtedly amplified the complexity of her engagement with such themes. Here, dystopia and Romanticism converge: both wrestle with the limits of selfhood and society, and

Shelley's plague-ravaged world transforms those philosophical tensions into visceral, human emotion.

Dystopia allows readers to confront and process real-world fears in a safe, exaggerated space. Where there is no worse condition that could possibly be imagined, anxieties are alleviated through their apotheosis and the catharsis that follows, and a new perspective crystallizes. Protagonists often awaken to injustice, gain agency and rebel, and the reader, through the vicarious participation that reading offers, is conferred the title of rebel in a fictional organized revolution. The very act of reading in a political world that deprioritises nuance and critical thinking in favour of symbolic grandstanding is subversive, appealing to the reader because of the freedom it provides in engaging with political rebellion in a fictional and a literal, macrocosmic way. In this sense, the endurance of dystopia fulfils Shelley's Romantic legacy: it reminds us that use of the imagination is itself a radical act of hope.

Word count: 974

#### References:

<sup>1</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'dystopia,' Oxford University Press. Definition: 'An imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible.'

<sup>2</sup> Watkins, Susan. Interview in *The Guardian*, 'From catastrophe to utopia: the power of dystopian fiction,' June 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Scholes, Justin and Jonathan Ostenson. 'Understanding the Appeal of Dystopian Young Adult Fiction.' *The ALAN Review*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2013, pp. 32–43.

<sup>4</sup> Shelley, Mary. *The Last Man* (1826), Volume I, Chapter I (Introduction). All quotations directly from this chapter.