

Dystopian Nightmare in Contemporary Adolescent Fiction and Its Ethical Value

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Abstract During the first decade of the 21st century, there appeared a dystopian boom in English adolescent literature market, where a series of dystopian fiction were published and approvingly accepted by both readers and critics. The dystopian boom conveys a common anxiety over the status quo of contemporary society and a pessimistic prospect of science application in the future. The original purpose of science is to meet the survival and development needs of human beings, but it is now improperly applied and becoming a threat to human civilization. The nightmare caused by severe environment pollution, destructive nuclear war and technological autocracy is the inevitable offspring of technology abuse, which is the major theme of contemporary dystopian fiction intended for the young adults. With great panic and alarming power the dystopian fiction expresses the anxiety over the ever increasingly pessimistic prospect of science development, and thus warns readers of the social, environmental, ethical or technological crisis ahead of them. The dystopian nightmare in contemporary adolescent fiction is rich in ethical value in that it helps its reader socialization, telling them what the world is like and how they should behave in it. The ethical value of adolescent dystopian fiction lies in its didactic message that helps to promote readers' level of social cognition and capability of making ethical choice.

Key words dystopian fiction; adolescent readers; ethical value

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During the first decade of the 21st century, there appeared a dystopian boom in English adolescent literature market, where a series of dystopian fiction were published and approvingly accepted by both readers and critics. The fact that the sales volume of Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* (2008-10) is overtaking that of *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) and *The Divergent* (2011-13) trilogy by Veronica Roth gained a global adolescent audience indicates that dystopian fiction is a popular genre in contemporary literary field. The dystopian boom conveys a common anxiety over the status quo of contemporary society and a pessimistic prospect of science development in the future. The original purpose of science and technology is to meet the survival and development needs of human beings, but it is now improperly applied and becoming a threat to human beings. The nightmare caused by severe environment pollution, destructive nuclear war and technological autocracy is the inevitable offspring of technology abuse, which is the major theme of contemporary dystopian fiction published in English speaking countries. With great panic and alarming power the dystopian fiction expresses the anxiety over the ever increasingly pessimistic prospect of science development, and thus warns readers of the negative effect of science application.

The Dystopian Turn in Adolescent Fiction

The term “dystopia” derives from the word utopia, which was originally coined by Thomas More in 1516 in his well known work entitled *Utopia*. The word “utopia” has generally two implications: it is usually used to refer to the ideal society that is spatially or temporarily set in a distant world; meanwhile, it is also employed to refer to the kind of literary genre that represents an ideal or desirable social blueprint. Similarly, the word “dystopia”, which was first used by John Stuart Mill in his speech delivered to the British House of Commons in 1868, also has two opposite implications. That is, dystopia can be used to refer to either an imagined dark society or a literary genre representing nightmarish social vision. Dystopian world generally appears in science fiction and are often used to warn readers of the social, environmental, ethical or technological crisis, which could potentially develop toward a dystopian situation in the future if they are left unaddressed. What the dystopian fiction describes is not a future world in which we would like to live, but one we are trying to escape from, and the main factor leading to the nightmarish prospect is science and its improper application.

There are both scientific and fantastic elements in dystopian writings, but dystopian fiction differs from science fiction or fantasy in that dystopian fiction

attaches far more importance to social and political critique. Instead of constructing a bright blueprint, the dystopian fiction describes a gloomy future for the human beings, with anti-scientism being the dominant theme. By focusing on the critique of society that is set in a future world, dystopian fiction provides readers with fresh perspectives on problematic social practices that might otherwise be taken for granted. In this paper, I work on the assumption that the contemporary turn to dystopian writing is largely due to the contemporary problems, and that dystopian fiction is kind of projection of social and ethical crisis in real world.

As a literature genre, dystopian fiction is closely related to the social ethos in a special society. The shift from utopias to dystopias in literature reflects the shift of social thinking and people's attitude toward science and its application. During the 18th and 19th century, people generally held a relatively optimistic attitude toward future. Their optimistic view of the world is largely based on two social theories: rationalism and evolutionism. The rationalists believe that the human being could create a marvelous future with their rationality or reason. As Elliott argues, "To believe in utopia one must believe that through the exercise of their reason man can control and in major ways alter for the better their social environment" (87). The evolutionists hold that not only the human themselves, but also the social organization and moral order could evolve to a perfect state, so there will be an admirable prospect awaiting the human. This kind of optimistic mood was projected in literature, and spawned a new genre, utopia, which presents the reader with a desirable vision. However, there appeared a pessimistic "dystopian turn" during the first decades of the 20th century, when the heavy casualties of the wars, political totalitarianism and technology abuse led to widespread skepticism and question of utopia, which gave rise to dystopian narratives. The dystopian fiction conveys a common anxiety over the pessimistic prospect of the future. Booker observes that "The modern turn to literary vision of future as nightmare is one of the most revealing indexes to the anxieties of our age" (16).

Some writers during the first decades of the 20th century were doubtful about utopia. In such dystopian works as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *1984* (1949), and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921), people "have been suspicious not only of the possibility of utopia, but its very desirability, equating conventional utopias with paralysis and stagnation" (Booker 16-17). The hint that the utopian fulfillment of all desires will necessarily bring about a dehumanizing stagnation is a common motif that runs throughout the 20th century dystopian literature. In the fictional world constructed by Huxley or Orwell, for example, the utopian dream has been realized, but it only turns out to be a

nightmare. Powered by the horrors of two world wars, the Nazi-like totalitarian regimes, and the nuclear holocaust, the 20th century literature has generally envisioned utopia as undesirable, for the fulfilling of utopian dream always brews dystopian nightmare. The dystopian texts like *Brave New World* have been far more influential than the utopian texts of the earlier centuries. Even such genres as science fiction, which is largely optimistic with the technological advancement, have taken a dystopian turn in the second half of the 20th century. It is the dark and nightmarish vision rather than ideal and desirable vision of future that provides modern writers with rich source materials and writing motivation. In a climate of widespread pessimism, recent decades have seen a rise of dystopian mood in popular literature as a whole. The commonest motifs in the dystopian texts include representing war sufferings, criticizing totalitarian regimes and warning against technology abuse.

As an important branch of literature, the juvenile fiction is undoubtedly influenced by the particular social context and ethical climate. The novels written for young readers before the 20th century are generally optimistic with happy endings. Especially in science fiction for young adults, technology is generally employed to support the utopian vision. However, the second half of the 20th century, when people came to doubt and question the technology progress and its effect on human society, witnesses the birth of dystopian fiction for the young adults. Susan Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967), which describes the problematic polarization between the rich and the poor in the cities and its effect on the young boys, is generally accepted as the first adolescent dystopian fiction. During the last three decades of the 20th century, some excellent dystopias intended for the young adults such as *Out There*(1971), *Brother in the Land*(1984) and *The Giver*(1993) were published.

If the writing and publishing of dystopian fiction intended for the young adults is sporadic during the second half of the 20th century, then it has become a dystopian boom during the past decade in the 21st century. John Green, an American novelist and literary critic, comments the phenomenon in his essay "Scary New World" published on *New York Times* in 2008. Green points out that "[t]he past year has seen the publication of more than a dozen post-apocalyptic young adult novels that explore what the future could look like once our unsustainable lifestyles cease to be sustained" (1). Such works as *Feed* (2002), *Exodus* (2002), *How I Live Now* (2004), *Uglies* (2005), *Little Brother* (2008), *Delirium*(2011), *Maggot Moon*(2012) are on the list of excellent dystopian fiction for young adults published in recent years. Amid this rising sea of dystopias, two trilogies stand apart as the "best-loved"

works: *The Hunger Game* trilogy (2008-2010) and *Divergent* trilogy (2011-2013). They are particularly popular among the youngsters and have been adapted for movies.

Dystopian Nightmare in Contemporary Adolescent Fiction

Literature works, as the mirror or the lamp that reflects social reality, are deeply rooted in the historical and social content in which they are produced. The dystopian texts seem to transcend the time and space, but in fact they are still subject to the circumstance in which they are produced. In Booker's words, "imaginary societies in the best dystopian fiction is always highly relevant more or less directly to real world societies and issues" (19). The recent phenomenon of dystopian boom is undoubtedly relevant to the destructive application of science, which is supposed to serve human beings rather than threaten or even destroy them. Despite the fact that there are some obvious surrealistic elements in it, the dystopian fiction for young adults is essentially realistic, for it deals with the real life issues like political issues, environmental pollution and nuclear wars fuelled by science and technology. Actually, the contemporary anxiety over science and its application is projected through the social and ethical nightmare that the young protagonists are facing in dystopian fiction. In this sense, the dystopian writing is kind of artistic response to contemporary social problems. The issues explored by contemporary adolescent dystopian fiction can be roughly classified into three categories: response to the ethics concerning science and its application, anxiety over contemporary environmental catastrophe, and reflection of war and its destructive effect.

Firstly, the moral failing associated with science and its improper application to politics is a common motif in the totalitarian dystopian fiction. In the imagined dystopian world, the rulers suppress individual will or personal wish in the name of public welfare. The political dystopian writers manage to achieve a dramatic effect by presenting the totalitarian practice in an exaggerated way. In such fiction as *The Giver* (1993) by Lois Lowry, the protagonist Jonas, a twelve-year-old boy, gains epiphany or insight into the dark quality of a seemingly utopian society. The totalitarian rulers in *The Giver* manage to eradicate the citizens' emotion and memory with the help of advanced technology so that the citizens are free from any sufferings, pains, or pleasure. As a result, the citizens in this dystopian world are living "a life without color, pain or past" (Lowry 165). The dystopian narrative suggests that the eradication of human memory or difference would not naturally lead to social equality, but lead to "a catastrophic narrowing of the imaginative

spectrum” (Wend-Walker 139). The improper ethics or beliefs in terms of governing the society tend to diminish the social diversity and vitality with the technological devices. As a result, the whole society is controlled by advanced technology and rigid mechanism, and the citizens as a whole are degenerated into a being without any emotion, passion, memory, or imagination. The scientific and technological achievement is meant to bring about convenience and comfort to the people, but it eventually provides the rulers with convenient tools for mental surveillance and psychic control. In the same manner, what Ally Condie represents in his dystopian text *Matched* (2011) is the problem resulting from technology advancement which is employed by the rulers as the means of social manipulation. In the dystopian world constructed by *Matched*, computer is the right tool used by the rulers to control everything, including the citizens’ study and work. Even such issues as love or marriage are determined by computer system. In this computer-dominated society, the social or ethical relationship among the society members is not based on blood bond or emotional attachment, but configured by a “fail proof” program. The heroine Kasia, for instance, is matched to a boy when she is 17 according to the personal data stored in the database. Similarly, Westfield’s *Uglies* and Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* present us with a similar technology-controlled world as *Matched* does. In the world constructed by *Uglies* trilogy, all the young people aged 16 have to accept a plastic surgery which not only beautifies all the young adults, but also tampers with their brain structure, so much so that the young citizens can be better mentally surveilled. The plastic surgery based on biological technology, is intended to remove the difference and inequality between people. As a result, the programmed life that the citizens live in this technology-controlled society is universal and uniform rather than diverse and harmonious. In this “beautiful new world”, the “Sameness” or the so-called “social harmony” is bought at the price of free choice and social diversity. The autocratic practice is unethical, for human’s complicated emotion and free will make it impossible to live a programmed life. We always find the protagonists struggling to destabilize sameness and redeem the ethical failings of his society toward the end of the dystopian fiction. Free choice is valued and ethical order is reconstructed. As Carter F. Hanson puts it, the dystopian fiction articulates “a radical reshaping of the future” (54-55).

Secondly, the improper ethical values concerning the relationship between environment and human are mirrored in the environmental dystopian fiction. The environmental or ecological crisis is a common theme in contemporary dystopian fiction for the young adults. As Jenkins notes, “many books for children and young teenagers have made modern ecological concerns the focus of the plots” (58). The

environmental catastrophe is the inevitable consequence of modern environmental ethics which misinterprets the earth as the inexhaustible resource or boundless trash bin. Environmental destruction is the severest consequence that the modern human beings are to endure. Faced with the deteriorating environment, many intellectuals express their concern about the social prospect. The dystopian boom is the artistic response to the global deteriorating ecological situation. The gloomy ecological prospect is reflected in such environmental dystopian fiction as Saci Lloyd's *The Carbon Diaries 2015* (2009) and *The Carbon Diaries 2017* (2011), which has its plot set in the near future, namely, in 2015 and 2017. *The Carbon Diaries* represents contemporary environmental ethics and its consequence: the increasingly warm climate, the alternative occurrence of flood and drought, the frequent earthquake and volcanic eruption, etc. Only after the irreversible disaster had occurred did the government realize the severity of the consequence. As a kind of remedial measure, the governments rigidly restrict each citizen's emission of CO₂ through monthly carbon ration, which brings horrific inconvenience to the public. The climatic and ecological problems depicted in *The Carbon Diaries* are much more alarming than what the officials and scientist currently believe, which serves as a warning to the decision makers. The movie entitled *2012* is kind of movie edition of Julie Bertagna's *Exodus* (2002) and Susan Beth Pfeffer's *The Last Survivors* (2008-2010), which present similarly post-apocalyptic vision: stormy tsunami, flooding calamity, burning drought, and the natural catastrophe like earthquake and volcanic eruption, which instantly turn our beautiful homestead into horrible inferno. The most alarming and severe consequence of environmental catastrophe is that the human civilization thoroughly collapses overnight. What the human are losing is not only the beautiful and comfortable living environment, but also the environmental ethics that the human and the environment should coexist harmoniously, which is what the writers' are appealing through their writings. The boom of the ecological dystopian fiction is the result of the writers' reflection of the increasingly severe environmental problems, and the artistic expression of environmental ethical dilemma, which provoke readers to examine our living style and arouse their awareness of responsibility.

Lastly, the destruction caused by technology-armed modern warfare is also the great concern of the dystopian fiction for the young adults. During the cold war, there appeared some novels that represent the nuclear war and its destructive consequence. Robert C. O'Brien's *Z for Zachariah* (1973) and Jean Ure's *Plague 99* (1989) are the case in point. During the first decade of the 21st century, the local wars broke out in many parts of the world, especially in the Arabian countries. The

dystopian fiction representing nuclear war mirrors the intense and complicated political situation in recent years. For instance, Roseff's *How I Live Now* (2004) is a war novel, in which the battlefield is set in England. The novel describes the tragic war and its physical injury and mental trauma on a young American girl Daisy and her British cousins. Through Daisy's eyes, readers can vividly perceive what is happening on the battle field and what kind of calamity the common people are suffering. The writers attempt to make the young readers, who are growing up in the false propaganda of warfare, come to comprehend the truth of the war. Through Daisy's refugee experience and the soldiers' casualties, the writer manages to convey such message to readers: the war is not a "great and justified" cause as it is propagated, but a brutal game played by the politicians so as to "make you lose everything you own and cherish" (Roseff 121). In similar manner, a critical attitude toward the war is clearly expressed in Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines* (2001). *Mortal Engines* describes the destructive consequence of a "Sixty Minute War", a nuclear war lasts only sixty minutes but it turns the whole continent into a wasteland. The nuclear war deprives most people of their living resources. To survive the nuclear disaster, a Nomad leader named Nikola Quercus designs a system known as "Municipal Darwinism." in which all the cities became immense vehicles named as Traction Cities, and must consume one another so as to survive. The ethical principle "survival of the strongest" is practiced in this post apocalyptic world, so "the great Traction City lumbers after a small town, eager to strip it of all assets and move on" (Reeve 10). The war-related dystopian fiction conveys to the young readers that the artfully propagated war is nothing but a cruel practice of the jungle law in human society.

The people in different historical context have different attitude toward utopia. The dystopian society depicted in the above mentioned works might be regarded as the utopian society by readers in the 18th century. The developing history of human civilization indicates that it is impossible for the human to realize the utopian dream, for the standardized happiness in utopian society is achieved at the expense of individual choice, which is against the free will of human being. In the contemporary technology-dominant society, people rely so much on the convenience and comfort brought about by technological advancement that they ignore the negative effect science brings. The adolescent dystopian writers are sensitively aware of the conspiracy between technology and politics and respond to it through their artistic writing. Different from the works intended for the little kids, which aim to construct a fantastic fairy world for readers, the novels intended for the young adults aim to provide its readers with "various useful knowledge to

comprehend the society and life correctly” (Nie, “Fundamental Function and Core Value of Literature” 9), so that the young readers have chances to insight different social phenomena. With its alarming and warning power, the contemporary adolescent dystopian fiction serves to lead the young adults, who are standing before the threshold of the adulthood, to become rationally mature.

The Ethical Value of Dystopian Narratives

Reading plays an important role in the process of a child’s initiation, for the reading experience during childhood and adolescence is profoundly influential. As Neil Sinyard observes, “The influence of early books is profound so much of the future lies on the shelves: early reading has more influence on adult than any religious teaching” (23). The literary works intended for different age groups have different style and content, and would undoubtedly exert quite different effects on readers. The works designed for the little children are comparatively pure and simple, with few dark elements. The adolescent readers, by contrast, may have much more chances to encounter the less agreeable experience such as pornography, violence, family breakdown, war, and death in their reading. Entering the stage of adolescence, teenage readers may discover that the simple literary works they used to read do not match the complexity of their new experience. As a result they demand that stories not only embody their wish and fantasy, but also help them adapt to their future life. The literature for the young adults has ethical value in that it helps its reader socialization, telling them what the world is like and how they should behave in it. Cedric Cullingford argues that “popular novels reflect something about the nature of the audience” (2), so the popularity of the dystopian fiction reflects the nature of adolescent readers, who are standing at the threshold of the adulthood and are eager to gain necessary knowledge about the adult world and their future life. The ethical value of adolescent dystopian fiction lies in its didactic message that functions to help the adolescent’s socialization. To be specific, dystopian fiction helps to promote readers’ level of social cognition and capability of ethical choice, which I would like to illustrate in the following paragraphs.

First of all, the message embedded in adolescent dystopian fiction helps to promote readers’ social cognition. When examining the transformative effect of dystopian fiction on adolescent readers, Carrie Hintz holds that it can “help adolescent readers cope with difficult political and social ideas within a context they can understand” (263). Since adolescent readers have very limited real life experience, reading could be an effective compensation to their lack of experience. Readers tend to interpret the fictional text according to their life experience and

level of understanding. Entering the scary new world sketched in dystopian fiction helps readers better comprehend the complexity and versatility of their future life. Dystopian fiction for young adults is the literary genre “with an adolescent hero or heroine seen coming to terms with the world and self” (Hunt 147). Through reading dystopian fiction, the young readers gain the indirect experience of life, which helps them grow from naivety to maturity. In this sense, dystopian fiction is the socialization textbook for the young adults before their entering the adult world, for these texts provide them with some useful experiences with which they have few opportunities to encounter in their daily life. For the young readers, the process of reading novel is a journey in which they detach themselves from their daily life and enter the protagonist’s world, sharing the protagonist’s sadness and happiness. The extreme environmental catastrophe, severe political struggle and serious ethical problem described in dystopian fiction are the experience that the teenagers can hardly encounter but are sure to help them become rationally mature. These post-apocalyptic novels are didactic in that they meet the reader’s mental needs to understand the adult society.

Then it is safe to argue that the message conveyed through dystopian fiction helps to promote adolescents’ capability of making ethical choice. Maria Nicolajeva notes that the literature for the novice reader has the potential to “convey ethical knowledge ..., evoke readers cognitive and affective responses to the ethical issues raised in the texts” (177). The experience gained from reading is one of the sources that help readers to develop their capability of rational judgment. Reading in childhood and adolescence, to some extent, helps a child develop into a rational, competent and socialized being. The social experience and life wisdom conveyed through literature are concrete and perceptible, which lays a solid foundation for the teenagers to reach the state of mental maturity, and make rational choice at the critical moment of life.

The adolescent dystopian fiction share the characteristics of bildungsroman, which narrates how a child undergoes the journey of awakening from innocence and ignorance, and becoming psychologically mature through trials and tribulations. In dystopian fiction, “political and social awakening is almost always combined with a depiction of the personal problems of adolescence” (Hintz 255). These adolescent heroes or heroines always find themselves in harsh environments or in some unfriendly social situations where they must make ethical choices. Generally speaking, the adolescent heroes or heroines are usually faced with two kinds of choices at the critical moment of their adolescence. One is to rebel and fight against the existing social or political order, and go toward maturity in the

process of struggling against the social evils as the protagonists do in *Hunger Game* or *Magot Moon*. Another is to learn to live in a world of resources deprivation and become mature while coming to terms with the world and self as the protagonists do in *How I Live Now*. In this sense, the adolescent dystopias are following the tradition of bildungsroman, which represents how a young protagonist awakens from naivety or innocence, has to shoulder the social or familial responsibility imposed on him or her, and grows mature in the hardest test of life. No matter presenting struggle for rights in a totalitarian society or struggle for survival in a post apocalyptic world, these novels provide readers with an opportunity to comprehend different social roles and behavior modes, and opportunity to observe the society from a transitional zone, so that they may learn to deal with some social problems and make ethical choice in a more rational way.

For the young readers who are quickly growing up, reading is much more than an activity of amusement or enjoyment. Reading is subtly influencing readers, who acquire the didactic message that there might be storm as well as sunshine in the society they are going to enter. What the young readers learn from the dystopian texts is that we cannot enjoy a happy and peaceful life until we undergo the kind of Phoenix Nirvana as the protagonist does in the dystopian fiction. They may find out through reading that there is both happy life as the fairy tales depicts and nightmarish one as the dystopias narrates awaiting them, which can mentally or psychologically prepare readers well for their future life in adulthood.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of dystopian boom results from many factors. The publishers, writers and readers contribute together to the dystopian boom in the past decade. Firstly, the joint effort made by contemporary writers and publishers to market the novels helps to enhance the sales volume of this genre, which determines the market and economic value of these novels. Secondly, this genre presents environmental deterioration, political totalitarianism and warfare disaster, which are the fundamental concern and anxiety of contemporary society. Consequently, they not only provide writers with writing motivation, but also arouse the reader's echo. Last but not least, the dystopias tally with young readers' cognition requirement and psychic needs, providing the youngsters who are to enter adult society with a window to see the society. Shen Shixi, a well-known Chinese animal novel writer, holds that the novel written for the teenagers should be different from that for small children in that adolescent literature is expected to help readers comprehend the adult society in which they are going to be a member soon. Shen argues that

“Youthhood is a threshold in our life. That one leaps over the threshold means he or she has to walk out of the aseptic area and enter the normal atmospheric environment filled with all kinds of virus and bacteria” (22). For the adolescent readers, the popular dystopian fiction is the kind of atmosphere with floating virus or bacteria, which helps them to improve their mental immunity and prepare them well for the future life in adulthood.

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