

"Do Writers Dream of Genre-Appropriate Sheep?" A Guide to Writing Your First Dystopian Short Story

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Pull Quote: "As long as there are faults to be patched in human society, there will be a demand for persuasive literature."

As long as there has been a crowd and a soap box to stand on, there have also been those to step up and shout at the masses to listen and call for change. As the written word became the predominant power, and town squares were replaced by newspapers, the spread of information and opinions accelerated at an unprecedented rate. For the first time in history, everyone with a message could reach thousands, if not millions, of ears. In order to be picked out from the thousands of screaming voices, the most influential writers sought out new and innovative methods for getting their message out there. Throughout different nations and corners of the world, several authors came to discover dystopian literature as a very effective form of writing. If a writer aims to show society what needs to be done, they simply need to hold a mirror up and show them what they will become if they stay the course. Dystopian literature took form Post-Industrial Revolution. As automation and machinery began to replace human labor, many writers took notice and gave a voice to the prevalent fear of being replaced. In the 1940s through the '70s, dystopian literature entered a golden age. The fear of this rapid progress sparked a revolution against the rise of automation that still simmers to this day. As we approach a new tipping point for the automation of society through the guise of AI, this pessimistic genre has become necessary once again. Over the past seventy or so years, dystopian stories have come to entertain rather than scare, which certainly has its place in

literature. But in the unlikely event that ChatGPT decided humanity could use a hard reset, a quick refresher on writing within the genre may be helpful.



EXPOSITION

Ray sat on his tattered futon, hugged tightly by the four walls of his studio apartment. Just outside the one window in his room, a bloodcurdling scream pierced through the night. Ray had become too accustomed to the dreadful sound and hardly registered it. The occurrence of these deathrattles had only been increasing since the latest update to the chip allowed for 1GB of content to be consumed per second. The update fried what little frontal lobe people had left, leaving them to wander the vacant streets like electric sheep to the slaughter.

Any dystopian short story worth its salt must start with world building exposition. This allows the audience to immerse themselves better and to understand the stakes of the story. Kurt Vonnegut begins "Harrison Bergeron" with "THE YEAR WAS 2081, and everybody was finally equal" (Vonnegut, 1). The exposition here provides the foundation for the dystopian mechanisms to take place in. In just the first sentence, Vonnegut was able to make the reader understand the message of the entire story. Exposition also serves to grab the reader's attention and keep them interested in the narrative. The first paragraph can be considered the most formative of the story, as it sets both the contextual framework and the stylistic tone for the rest of the piece. As typically presented by the expository paragraph, most dystopian stories tend to follow a protagonist in order to show the corruption of the dystopia in a format that the audience

can best empathize with. Once again, “Harrison Bergeron” kicks off the narrative with a powerful appeal to pathos. Immediately upon meeting one of the two central characters, George, the audience must watch as he is tortured by enforcement methods used in this dystopian society: “‘Boy!’ said Hazel, ‘that was a doozy, wasn’t it?’ It was such a doozy that George was white and trembling, and tears stood on the rims of his red eyes” (Vonnegut, 2). By following the life of two small characters, the reader can feel the emotional weight that the dystopia places on the individual. The reader quickly empathizes with George, creating more disdain for the corrupt society than simply learning its rules could allow.



CONTENT

As Ray looked around, he saw only ghosts trapped in an imaginary world, stumbling on curbs and slumped against walls, their milky eyes flicking back and forth as their fevered brains struggled to consume stimulus as fast as the government could manufacture it. This was certainly the technology, but the suffering, the pure, unadulterated misery, was caused by other people. They saw the decline of society, and they exploited it. Now a small group of people acted as gods over the entire nation.

Dystopian fiction often involves some form of technological or societal advancement that has become distorted into something sinister. Humanity becomes too fixated on eliminating discomfort to notice that everything human is gone. Ray Bradbury’s “The Veldt” embodies this trope to a tee. People become so reliant on technology that they are utterly incompetent without it: “Why, you’d go hungry tomorrow if something went wrong in your kitchen. You wouldn’t know

how to cook an egg” (Bradbury, 10). When humans use technology like a crutch, they become stunted in its absence. The dystopian world is not always perverted purely through technology, though. Sometimes, society collapses due to an uncontrollable disaster, and the twisted nature of humanity shapes the dystopia. Octavia Butler’s “Speech Sounds,” for example, explores a world scarred by a disease that renders a vast majority of the population illiterate and mute. When those gifted with language skills reveal themselves, the language impaired people are overcome with a jealous bloodlust: “He could read, she realized belatedly. He could probably write, too. Abruptly, she hated him—deep, bitter hatred” (Butler, 6). The ultimate collapse of structure in this story can be attributed towards the human urge to betray and kill in order to get ahead. While dystopia achieved through bloated technology has ruled the genre since the 21st century, this trope only necessitates the use of some catalyst to expose the thinly veiled evil and corruption that lives in the heart of humanity.



STYLE

It was at that moment that a patrol of three peace officers burst down Ray’s door. Two grabbed Ray roughly by each shoulder. The third drove his baton into his back, shattering his sacral spine. When the guards let go, Ray dropped to the ground, gazing in horror at the two dead sacks of flesh that were once his legs. He felt a sharp tug on the back of his neck as his body dragged across the floor, and he slipped out of consciousness.

Stylistically, many dystopian short stories tend to skew the tone of the story towards a robotic, matter-of-fact voice. Butler’s “Speech Sounds” utilizes this trope in order to capitalize on

the visceral nature of the scene: “The thought that Obsidian should be buried occurred to her before she reached the car, and she did vomit” (Butler, 11). This marks the predominant tonal difference between dystopian short stories and other forms of propaganda: the cold, indifferent voice. By keeping the tone of the writing neutral, even in the most grotesque situations, the audience would have a chance to react how they naturally would to the stimulus. The impartiality also gives the reader more trust in the narrator as an omniscient being, creating the impression that they are not being led to believe a biased version of the truth.



CALL TO ACTION

Ray laid there, surrounded by the fallen bodies that once upheld this oppressive system. He smiled and let the pistol fall from his hand. The death of the Council marked the end of an age. Whether something worse would take its place, he did not know. All that Ray knew was that humanity had a chance to begin anew. He smiled softly as he slipped into the dark for the final time.

A vast majority of dystopian literature ends on a note of hope for society to recover. This is the author’s direct call-to-action for the readers. If the events of this book are accepted to be the future of humanity, this trope embodies the mentality required to prevent that dystopia from coming to fruition. Some authors, like Vonnegut, choose to stamp out that spark of hope: “It was then that Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General, came into the studio with a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun. She fired twice, and the Emperor and the Empress were dead before they hit the floor” (Vonnegut, 5). Others, however, like to leave the ending more

ambiguous. As long as the audience believes in the never-ending fight between corruption and order, they will be inspired to fight for order.



And there you have it. Armed with these tips, you can take down Google Gemini with one beautifully written story. Or just write one for fun. The only mission of this paper is to ensure that this hokey genre, full of flying cars and evil possessed smart-homes, does not end up abandoned in the 20th century. As long as there are faults to be patched in human society, there will be a demand for persuasive literature. And there is no genre quite as equipped for the job as dystopian fiction.

WORD COUNT: 1517

Works Cited

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