

Dystopic Tension

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Lost The Plot

Recently, a number of well produced fantasy and science fiction projects have been released, inspiring a fresh batch of entertaining and insightful online commentaries. The mix of new and nostalgic releases has set the stage for an expansive conversation around the projects themselves and their relationship to the real world. I have really enjoyed witnessing it and partaking in it. However, in the midst of the discussion, I have become convinced of something disturbing about the present and emerging use of the English language: namely that many individuals are either not familiar with or have lost the distinct meaning of the term Dystopia.

This misunderstanding may be a result of the generally dark tone that the last few decade's worth of oppressive and malicious storytelling motifs have presented. Modern society has been feasting on a regular diet of dark, abusive, and harsh worldbuilding for so long that the words we use to describe these stories have become infected by it. Somehow, the term Dystopia is regularly applied to any work with these types of dark, abusive, or harsh tones. While sounding intelligent, this use of the word is unfortunately incorrect. Like many generalizations, it's sloppy and lazy categorization. More importantly, this tendency indicates that much of the fantasy and science fiction community has either lost sight of or never knew the distinct, intentional meaning of the term Dystopia.

I suggest we do so to our peril.

Chicken & The Egg

Dystopia is not a term that was created out of thin air. It emerged from a historical sequence from which it derives its contextual purpose. Dystopia is a term that lives in tension with its predecessor, Utopia.

Satirical Genius

In the early 1500s, Sir Thomas More¹ penned his famous work Utopia². More wrote Utopia in the quasi serious/satirical vein, a common technique used in that era of sociopolitical literature. Writers

of that era used this amorphous technique as a way to conceal cultural criticism and political discontent behind a masked mixture of serious prose and ironic tone. Satire served the dual purpose of engaging the audience with entertaining prose while concealing genuinely flagrant criticisms from the author's targets.

In his book *Utopia*, More fashioned the term "Utopia" to describe a perfect world that is also an imaginary world. According to More, Utopia is a non-existing place³ that is perceived as perfect⁴. His specific manifestation of a place is the focus of the story. The book itself is clearly written with broader intent. More was successful in creating a powerful, enduring meme from this work.

Perfectly Unreal

More's constructed term, Utopia, endures because it captures two human concepts into a vibrant tension.

On one side of this tension is the concept of perfection. Perfection is the pursuit of idealists. Idealism is part of a branch of philosophy called "Isms" where each position proposes the absolute of a particular concept or standard. Idealism⁵ is the Ism, or absolute pursuit, of the ideal. Idealism is the practice of applying imagined notions of perfection to real life situations. It is the idealist that holds the tension of perfection on this side of Utopia.

On the other side of this tension there is the concept of nothing, non-existence. Every idealistic blueprint looks amazing on paper; not only possible, but also a significant improvement on what already exists, be it a problem to solve or a better form of a previously constructed solution. This is where the idiom "everything looks good on paper"⁶ comes from. An idealist can architect a better solution by appearance. But the thing represented by the blueprint does not exist. At least not yet. It is held in the midst of tension between the perfect and the unrealized.

Imperfectly Real

The practical question is: what happens when an idealistic plan is executed? This step is where the historical sequence moves from the now established term Utopia to the creation of its sister term Dystopia.

The first clear historical use of the term Dystopia is found in John Stuart Mill's Parliamentary speech (UK) in 1868⁷. In that speech, Mill argued that the proposed Irish land policy was going to become certain disaster stating,

"What is commonly called Utopian is something too good to be practicable; but what they appear to favour is too bad to be practicable".⁸

Regardless of how history shook out on this exact issue, this particular moment facilitated the creation of the word Dystopia complete with tension-filled meaning.

Bad Place

The word Dystopia is formed by the merging of two Greek words: the word "dys", meaning generally "hard, difficult, wrong, or bad", and the same Greek word "topos", meaning "place", that More used to construct his term, Utopia. At face value (and without the historical context I've provided above), Dystopia could indeed be interpreted generally as a "bad place". This interpretation appears to match the usage I have observed in the modern discourse. Within such a perspective, any story motif within the spectrum of horrifically-bad-to-undesired could be labeled as Dystopian.

This is inaccurate, though. The historical context reveals that the term Dystopia was not created with the intent of conveying a generally bad or undesired meaning. Rather, it is a term that explains a very specific sort of "bad place", one that was constructed from Utopic plans.

Disastrous Design

Dystopia is the product of Utopic design.

One could add "gone wrong" to the previous statement, but that would be naive (and oddly more harmful than helpful). Utopic plans create Dystopic situations when they are enacted into policy or executed in production. That is their nature. The purpose of these terms held in tension is to reveal that fatal flaw. Through the term Utopia, Thomas More proposed that a perfectly conceived place is also non-existent. John Stuart Mill followed up by judging Utopic plans to be catastrophic in the real world when applied to real situations through the use of his term, Dystopia.

Utopia is fine unless one tries to make it, for by doing so one inevitably creates Dystopia.

Blind Spots

The burning question is "why this is the case?". Why do Utopic plans create Dystopic realities?

The reasons for that are complicated. However, one of the core reasons is found in the nature of Idealism itself.

Idealism, like all isms, is fraught with blind spots. The overly focused nature of an "ismic" (only, *sola*) pursuit of Ideals restricts one's field of vision. One instinctively and/or specifically avoids that which lies outside the scope of the Ideal, namely anything that is considered less-than-ideal or normal. This pattern of process creates plans that ignore the practical. This is because idealists disregard the normal state of things by their mis-pointed focus on what they perceive as perfect.

Because of blind spots, idealists construct plans with **guaranteed** blind spots in them.

A Certain Kind of Bad

What Utopic plans construct is much different than what is intended. If enacted, these plans are full of blind-spot-generated flaws. Critical flaws. This generates a specific kind of "bad place", the Dystopia.

This is not the only kind of "bad place" in story. There are many kinds of bad places. For example: the apocalyptic bad place is one formed as the result of an ecological or other environment-oriented disaster. The sociopolitical dark place is what most ancient and medieval political systems are. Dystopias are not these types of "bad places". Dystopia is the product of someone foolishly attempting to create a Utopia.

Necessary Tension

Idealists construct Dystopia in pursuit of Utopia. This is the tension.

The tensor between Utopia and Dystopia is idealism. Idealism is critically blind by nature, predictably creating harmfully impractical solutions to real world problems. The result is a solution that is horrifically flawed, instigating revolution against both system and the designer.

This pattern is how we get the painful cycle of idealistic revolution, the pendulum swing of similarly flawed idealists vying for design rights on real problems.

A Dismal Solution

There is, perhaps a better word for public discourse around the dark, abusive, and harsh worldbuilding that is commonplace in modern fantasy and science fiction. That term is dismal, meaning: depressing, dreary, gloomy, pitifully or disgracefully bad. It certainly conveys the tone, but is woefully a less-intellectually sounding term than dystopia so likely not to be adopted. But hey, no one's perfect. Especially idealists.

Footnotes

1. [Thomas More \(Wikipedia\)](#)
2. [Utopia by Thomas More \(Wikipedia\)](#)
3. Utopia being a construct of the Greek *ou-topos* : "no place" or "no where"
4. A parallel construct of the Greek *eu-topos* meaning "good place"
5. [Idealism \(Merriam-Webster\)](#)
6. [Look Good On Paper \(thefreedictionary.com\)](#)
7. [John Stuart Mill \(Wikipedia\)](#)

8. [Dystopia \(Wikipedia\)](#)
9. Write-off comments such as "gone wrong" or "hasn't really been done right yet" avoid the core issue by reassociating blame on the executors instead of the designers. This unnecessarily and harmfully clouds the core issue, something the idealists are inclined to do.

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