**Understanding Dystopia Literature**

A Dystopian society as an unfavorable society in which to live, coming from the Ancient Greek roots dys- and *-topia*, which mean "bad" and "place to live" respectively. Dystopia is the antithesis of Utopia.

"In a dystopian story, society itself is typically the antagonist; it is society that is actively working against the protagonist’s aims and desires. This oppression frequently is enacted by a totalitarian or authoritarian government, resulting in the loss of civil liberties and untenable living conditions, caused by any number of circumstances, such as world overpopulation, laws controlling a person’s sexual or reproductive freedom, and living under constant surveillance" (Adams, 2011).

A common theme among reviews of the genre is describing dystopias as subjective. Some people within the dystopic society may not recognize or care that they are part of a dsystopian society, and therefore, is it still a dystopia? For example, if you are living in a society in which the birth rate is strictly monitored and regulated, but you don’t care about procreating, then you might not find this to be dystopia. However, if you do not like the idea of someone dictating to you when, how, and how often you are allowed to procreate, then living in this society might very well prove to be a dystopia for you.

Janni Lee Simner, in her blog post [Arranged Marriages and Dystopian Fiction](http://www.tor.com/blogs/2011/04/arranged-marriages-and-dystopian-fiction), addresses this idea. She brings up the idea in relation to Ally Condie's dystopian YA book Matched, where a young girl's life is entirely arranged for her by society, down to who she is allowed to marry. Given Adam's description above, this falls under the dystopic category. But in our own world and society, arranged marriages are not uncommon, and not all are opposed to the idea of having a spouse chosen for them.

The best dystopian novels ask us not only to reflect on the society in which the novel is set, but also to questions our own societies and what it means to be human.

**General Qualities that make up a Dystopian Novel**

**Backstory:**Dystopias are often part of a fictional universe, therefore a back story of how this world came to be or how it evolved (or de-volved) from our current world is necessary. The back story explains how the shift in control came to occur, with the end result being changed societal norms or a government now run by corporations, totalitarian dictatorships or bureaucracies*.*

**Hero:**There are a few different types of hero/protagonist that can occur in dystopian stories. One is the protagonist who intuitively feels something is wrong with society and sets out to change it, believing that it is possible to overthrow the dictatorship, or merely escape from the misery. Often the protagonist's opinion varies significantly from those around him, leading to clashes and linking back to the question asked earlier regarding perception of dystopias.

Another common form of protagonist is the high-standing, accepted hero, who is part of the Utopian perception of the dystopia, but eventually discovers or comes to understand how wrong society has become and either attempts to change it or destroy it*.*

**Conflict:**Often, the hero meets a person who represents the dystopia, possibly the leader of the society. In the conflict, the hero meets and is sometimes helped by a group of people who are also trying to escape or destroy the dystopia. Sometimes they are people who were once part of the dystopia, but were exiled or have escaped, or they have created their own society within the dystopia (Think of the Fringes in The Chrysalids)*.*

**Climax:**In dystopian literature, the story is often unresolved. Often the dystopia is not brought down. The hero may make their individual stand (or with the group discussed above) and often fails, but gives hope to others in the dystopia. Sometimes this climax is the hero's escape from the dystopia (Think of The Giver). Other times the hero fails to achieve anything and the dystopia continues as before*.*