

Proposal

Title – Ursula K. Le Guin and Shirley Jackson: Expanding Dystopia’s Definition in the 20th Century

Program of Study – English

Presentation Type – Choose one of the following: PowerPoint, Print Poster, Digital Poster, PowerPoint (Remote)

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Category – Choose one of the following: Basic, Applied, Theoretical Proposal, Textual or Investigative, Creative and Artistic

Abstract: During the twentieth century, the genre of short fiction observed an increase in discussions of dystopia. Because of contemporary short story theory, this genre offers itself to expanding dystopian themes; moreover, though the definition of dystopia in literature typically limits the stories to a strict focus, a progressive definition of underlying dystopian concepts broadens the term to encapsulate more short fiction from the twentieth century than what is immediately apparent. As a seminal dystopian short story, Ursula K. Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (1975) functions as a basis for expanding the definition of dystopian literature. This paper critically engages the theory of the short story and of dystopia to suggest that, though dystopia is typically recognized only when explicit, an examination of the elements of much twentieth-century literature shows that this period of literature bears more than this immediate and limited trace of dystopian thought and exploration. To support this claim, I use elements of Le Guin’s story to implicate stories like Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery” (1948) for classification as dystopian literature through thematic connections, even though “The Lottery” is not typically understood to be a dystopian short story. When viewed through the context of twentieth-century theory, crucial dystopian elements, and Le Guin’s story which is firmly

established within the body of dystopian literature, Jackson's "The Lottery" contains certain dystopian features and connections that are not otherwise apparent. Thus, I argue that the term "dystopia" functions more as a conceptual framework than as a strict label, allowing for the inclusion of works not traditionally considered dystopian to adopt this classification. This paper ultimately culminates in an argument for the widespread nature of dystopian preoccupations within a historical, literary, and cultural period by demonstrating how the theories of dystopia and story interact, presenting the potential for further expansion of dystopian themes in previously unconsidered literature and texts.

Christian worldview integration: The nature of dystopia presents weighty concerns for Christians to consider, as dystopia deals with mankind as he strives for, but ultimately falls short of, perfection. My research into the topic of wide-spread dystopian thought has been influenced by my Christian worldview because of the very foundations of dystopia, most notably the demonstration of mankind's relationship to perfection and mankind's search for a standard of ultimate truth or reality. A dystopia, as a place in which life is bad or in havoc, demonstrates mankind's attempts to control and achieve a state of perfection that he cannot obtain. Thus, dystopian thought in literature recognizes and confronts—both implicitly and explicitly—the dangers and destructions of human control, incomplete reason, and faulty attempts to achieve a standard of goodness or desirability apart from God. For Christians, then, dystopian literature may warn us about what we ought to be wary of in an increasingly-hostile world in which emphasis on mankind's control and knowledge is growing. Just as the Christian worldview recognizes the problems of mankind's reason because of our depravity, so does dystopian concern show where a culture will end up if confidence is placed upon the potential for man's

ultimate perfection through man himself. The culture will inevitably crumble. Dystopian literature shows that mankind needs to depend on the reason and truth of God, not on that of man, for man is flawed. My primary argument from a Christian worldview is that dystopian literature indicates that writers from all strains of thought have a fundamental, though often implicit, understanding of the depravity of man, a principle recognized by Christians because of mankind's fall in the Garden of Eden. Because of the widespread presence of dystopian concerns, even amongst those who are not believers, my research has been informed by the understanding that all of mankind recognizes a depravity apart from God. It is in this sense that fear of a dystopian future emerges.