

American Dreams and American Dystopias:

Examining Dystopian Parallels and Applications in *The Great Gatsby* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Given the recent upsurge of popularity in the dystopian fiction genre, especially among young adults, this study explores the genre of dystopian fiction and questions whether or not other, more classic works of fiction can reasonably fit into it. While dystopias are often thought of as works of speculative, futuristic science fiction, especially in recent portrayals, several well-known dystopias in literature and fiction have disregarded the element of advanced technology to focus instead on human nature, the direction of society, and man's relationship to it. This study argues that it is not primarily the fantastical science fiction explorations that constitute a dystopia, but rather such universal issues as a society oppressed, whether by some outside force or by its own desires and customs, and a dissatisfied protagonist who does not conform to the dominant social system. By these criteria, and by examination of common tropes and conventions of the genre over time, even some stories that are not typically considered dystopian could arguably fit within the dystopian fiction genre.

Based on common, recurring archetypes between typical dystopian works and certain classic American novels, this study argues that those American classics can be read as dystopias or can fit into the dystopian fiction category. Although they take place in real historical periods, situated within fictionalized portrayals of real societies, they still grapple with the same issues of a society that strives to achieve order and perfection, but ultimately fails to reach that goal and becomes enslaved to the results of that pursuit. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, for example, portrays the Roaring Twenties as an era largely dominated by the pursuit of wealth, social status, and hedonistic pleasure, but that falls short of its lofty, paradisiacal ideals. On the

other hand, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* features an almost opposite era, the subsequent Great Depression, in which people are restricted not only by economic hardship but also by rigid class divisions and culturally mandated prejudice. Both of these novels, and their authors' portrayals of the societies in which they take place, contain significant elements of dystopian fiction based on certain shared tropes and archetypes. This study examines whether these two novels can be legitimately considered works of dystopian fiction, as well as whether the dystopian approach can be beneficial in teaching the novels to high school students and making them seem more relevant in light of recently popular trends.

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