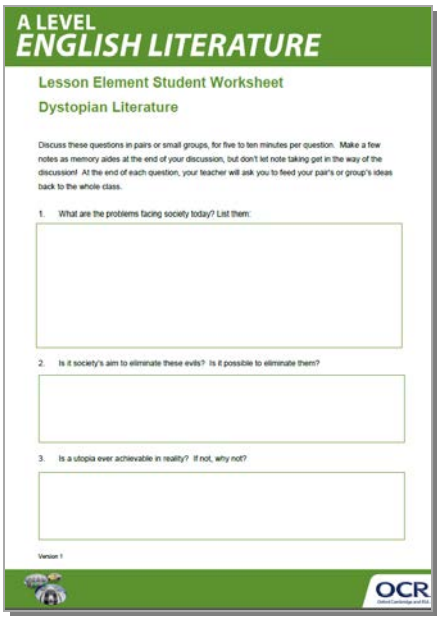
A LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE

Lesson Element

Dystopian literature

Instructions and answers for teachers

These instructions should accompany the OCR resource 'Dystopian literature' activity *which supports OCR A Level English Literature*


A LEVEL
ENGLISH LITERATURE

Lesson Element Student Worksheet

Dystopian Literature

Discuss these questions in pairs or small groups, for five to ten minutes per question. Make a few notes as memory aides at the end of your discussion, but don't let note taking get in the way of the discussion! At the end of each question, your teacher will ask you to feed your pair's or group's ideas back to the whole class.

1. What are the problems facing society today? List them:

2. Is it society's aim to eliminate these evils? Is it possible to eliminate them?

3. Is a utopia ever achievable in reality? If not, why not?

Version 1

OCR

The Activity:

An introductory lesson for OCR A level teachers: 1-1 ½ hours

This activity offers an opportunity for English skills development.

This activity offers an opportunity for maths skills development.

Associated materials:

'Dystopian literature' Lesson Element student worksheet.

Suggested timings:

Task 1: 1-1 ½ hours

Version 2

OCR
Oxford Cambridge and RSA

Introduction to the task

This lesson is intended to introduce the topic of Dystopia to students taking this option for A level Component 02: Comparative and Contextual Study. It is intended to be a one hour or ninety minute lesson, but has been designed so that teachers can skip, omit and introduce extra material whenever they wish.

The lesson introduces the topic (in part one) by asking students to consider the problems of society today; whether these can be solved; what sort of literature would represent a world in which one or more of these problems becomes the dominant feature of society (literature which is, in some sense, dystopian); what sort of literature would represent a world in which these problems are solved (utopian literature). The lesson then moves on (in part two) to consider specific examples of dystopian literature and texts, including those from popular culture (such as “The Hunger Games”).

The lesson plan includes a student **worksheet**. Students should refer to this at various points in the lesson, rather than attempting to complete it all at once at the start of the lesson. Again, the worksheet can be adapted to suit the teacher’s needs.

Instructions

The lesson plan is written in the form of a script. This should make it immediately clear which parts are for the student and which parts are for the teacher.

The Lesson

Part One: an introduction to the genre of Dystopian literature and its utopian opposite

Teacher: As a start to our study of **dystopian literature**, we need to get into the minds of writers and consider, why should they feel the need to write such works?

For the starter activity, you need to work in pairs or in small groups and refer to the **worksheet**.

The questions will take between five and ten minutes to discuss. Make a few notes at the end to aide your memory, but don't write down every point made: that will only limit the discussion. After the small group and pair work, we will feed ideas back to the whole class.

Worksheet: What are the problems facing society today? List them:

Suggestions for directing the discussion

The problems might include:

- Homelessness
- Poverty
- Racism
- Homophobia
- Disease
- Greed
- Avarice
- Crime
- Violence
- Sexism
- Selfishness…

Teacher: Look at the second question on your worksheet and discuss it in your pairs and groups:

Worksheet: Is it society's aim to eliminate these evils? Is it possible to eliminate them?

Teacher: *hears feedback from the groups then:* Such a society would be a **utopia**: an ideal society; utopian literature is literature which depicts such an ideal society.

Worksheet: Is a utopia ever achievable? If not, why not?

Worksheet: Where can we find images of utopia in popular culture?

Suggestions for directing the discussion:
We can find images of utopia in some of the idylls shown in Disney animations, where all of creation is in harmony: where, for example, all nature - human beings, animals, birds - rejoice in the Prince and Princess's marriage.

Teachers might like to show the last cartoon scene of "Enchanted" (although the rest of the film sends up the Disney idyll!) where the Prince marries the New York girl and all the forest creatures attend.
Is utopia possible? Gene Roddenberry, who created "Star Trek" (1966-present) thought that it was, and by the time of the starship Enterprise (at least in the original series, original cast movies and "Star Trek: The Next Generation"), human beings would have eliminated poverty, racism, war…so all threats would come from outside humanity. The aliens are symbols of non-Americans who threaten the American way of life. The Klingons, for example, represent the communist, Soviet Russians at the height of the cold war. It was very optimistic of Roddenberry to think that human beings would evolve to perfection, and not very likely.

Teacher: The opposite of utopian fiction is **dystopian fiction**. In a **dystopia**, the ills of society, individual or collectively, run riot. If a utopia is a society in which all virtue is perfected and all of society's ills have been eliminated, a dystopia is its opposite: a society in which the ills of society thrive and virtue is crushed.

Worksheet: Is a dystopian society possible? Where can we find historical or contemporary examples? Where can we find examples in literature and popular culture like television and cinema?

Suggestions for guiding the discussion:
There may not be utopias in reality, but there are, and have been, dystopian societies: Nazi Germany, Stalin's Russia, North Korea… What might the reality of dystopian societies, but the fantasy of utopian ones, suggest about human nature?

Dystopias in texts are found…
In literature: “Lord of the Flies”, “1984”, “Brave New World”; “The Hunger Games” (but it has an optimistic ending…)
In film: “Blade Runner”, “The Matrix”, “The Hunger Games”, “Children of Men”, “Mad Max”

Teacher: Refer students to the worksheet.

Read the quotation from “1984” (see below): then, individually and without consulting anyone else, write down your immediate response to the quotation. What does it make you think or feel?

“If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – for ever.”
(“1984”, part III, chapter iii)

Orwell, 2013, "1984" - The Annotated Edition p.307

Teacher: (after students have written down their first impressions:) Now share your first impressions with others: then, feed back to the rest of the class.

Notes for guiding the discussion:
Is the quotation, for example, too bleak? Is human nature really like this?

Teacher: some assumptions about human nature might be described as utopian:

- that human beings are basically (“basically” in the sense of at basis, in essence, originally) good – cf Wordsworth, “trailing clouds of glory do we come/From God, who is our home” (from “Intimations of Immortality”). Utopian literature is like pastoral literature, which looks backwards to a golden age where human beings are in harmony with nature and we lead simple, happy lives tending our sheep, making love in the sunshine, dancing and playing pan pipes. The main difference between pastoral and utopian literature is that utopian literature imagines that the golden age is yet to come. (For a witty debunking of the Golden Age, see the 1974 “Doctor Who” story “Invasion of the Dinosaurs” and “Fifty Years in Time and Space: A Short History of Doctor Who” (pps. 80-81, Frank Danes, St Mark’s Press, 2012 and 2013)

Some assumptions about human nature might be described as dystopian:

- that human beings are basically evil or at least have an ingrained capacity for great evil. A number of branches of Christianity believe in the concept of Original Sin. The first sin committed in the Bible (Genesis) was disobedience to God's command to not eat of the fruit of knowledge. When Eve ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and caused Adam to also eat the fruit, this resulted in the Fall from Innocence and mankind's banishment from the Garden of Eden. Having Fallen, humankind became perpetrators and victims of great evils including murder, sexual assault, theft etc etc Therefore the 'Original Sin' represents the birth of the potential to commit evil acts, and the doctrine of Original Sin determines that this sin is passed down from one generation to the next- or rather that the capacity for evil is present in all of humankind. However, it is also important to note that Christians do believe that baptism into the Christian faith reclaims the person for God and that every person can choose to turn away from sin, or can be reclaimed through the process of seeking forgiveness. Many Christians may choose to read the Bible as a message of humankind's redemption, but in literary contexts the concept of Original Sin has provided a focal point for considering the worst versions of human evil. Many authors have chosen to interpret Original sin as an expression of the idea that human beings are basically inclined to do evil things rather than good ones, and, left to their own devices, without the law and fear of punishment to prevent them, will indulge their evil natures. (Golding enacts this idea in "Lord of the Flies".) Writers were drawn again to the concept of Original Sin after the Second World War and, for example, the discovery of the concentration camps by the allies.

Teacher: The final idea about human nature is that human beings are neither basically good nor basically evil but are like a blank sheet of paper. This doctrine is called tabula rasa (Latin for "blank tablet"). We are neither good nor evil but entirely defined by our environment: our economic, social, historical circumstances.

Teacher: (time permitting) See your **worksheet:**
What do you students think are the strengths and weaknesses of these three doctrines?

- an beings are essentially good
- human beings are essentially evil (original sin)
- human beings are neither essentially good nor evil, but are formed by their environment (tabula rasa)

How does the idea of tabula rasa fit with utopian or dystopian literature?

Second part of the lesson: Focus on Dystopian Literature

Teacher: This A level topic focuses on the genre of dystopian literature.

Worksheet: Why should writers wish to write dystopian literature in the first place?

Notes for guiding the discussion:

- Because they are inclined to depression or pessimism about human nature or some aspect of the human spirit:

After serving in World War II and witnessing the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis at first or second hand, William Golding (author of "Lord of the Flies") said he recognised that he had a Nazi within himself, kept at bay by the restraints of civilisation. But what if those restraints were removed…? He combined this idea with his observations of boys' behaviour at the prep school where he taught, and his rejection of the saccharine nineteenth century novel "Coral Island", which has the same plot as "Lord of the Flies" – young boys are stranded on a desert island – and even the same names – Ralph and Jack. Unlike "Lord of the Flies", the boys in "Coral Island" are dashed good chaps and look after each other, as British boys jolly well should. Golding's wife encouraged him to write a modern "Coral Island" in which boys behaved as boys actually would behave. Hence "Lord of the Flies", which shows that, left to their own devices, human beings will behave badly, not well. The boys, of course, begin to torture and murder each other. The socialist Orwell became disillusioned with Soviet Communism (see "Animal Farm") and wrote as a journalist in post-war Germany. Both combined with his observations of political apathy in England to become "The Last Man in Europe", which became "1984": a dystopia about totalitarianism.

Aldous Huxley despaired of hedonism and the pursuit of pleasure as over-riding principles in the 1930s and wrote "Brave New World", in which love is replaced by pleasure and marriage by promiscuity.

- We might mischievously suggest writers choose dystopian literature as a genre because they are British and our damp island breeds such depressing thoughts. This idea is demonstrated by the opening of "1984" with its emphasis on the weather: "it was a bright *cold* day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. Winston Smith, his chin nuzzled into his breast in an effort *to escape the vile wind…"* ("1984", part I, chapter i) [italics mine]

- **Worksheet:** Is dystopian literature mainly the preserve of male writers? What might this tell us about the difference between the male and female psyche?

(Interestingly, only two of the authors on the set text list are women: Margaret Atwood and P.D. James)

Worksheet: What do students think of dystopian ideas? Alarming, depressing, interesting, exciting…? Would they like to read such literature? Why? Why not? (five minutes' discussion in pairs or groups, feed back to the whole class)

Worksheet: Which other literary genres is dystopia related or similar to?

Notes for guiding the discussion:

Dystopian literature is indeed related to other genres, such as:

- *Satire*: literature which uses humour or irony to make serious points. Dystopia has its roots in satires like "Gulliver's Travels": Swift satirises human beings as yahoos.
- *Science Fiction*: some dystopian novels are set "elsewhere" or in "the future": "Lord of the Flies", "1984", "Brave New World" all set in the future from the time of their publication. **Teacher:** ask students, what might the advantage of such a setting "elsewhere" be? (allows the novelist more freedom with details, such that characters and events are not necessarily identified with real characters and events. Compare, for example, how Shakespeare uses "abroad" in his plays to comment on England safely, as Vienna is paralleled to London in "Measure for Measure".) The author can, if she wishes, deny the parallel if he fears damage to her reputation or a writ for libel.
- *Fantasy* – Mordor in "Lord of the Rings" is like a dystopia; Sauron based by Tolkein on the 1930s dictators.

Teacher: Dystopian literature owes much to all of these genres and yet is distinct from all of them.

P.D. James, who wrote "The Children of Men", acknowledged that it could be seen as science fiction but was anxious that it was instead identified as a moral fable. (**Teacher:** "The Children of Men" didn't sell nearly as well as her detective novels. Why might this be?)

Teacher: some common preconceptions about dystopia:

i. A dystopian novel represents the whole world view of the author.

(Not so: it is an imaginative response to a perceived evil or wrong about her, which occupied her at the time of writing. The novelist may cheer up and go on to write something else entirely. H.G. Wells abandoned his dystopian science fiction for light social realism, like "The History of Mr Polly".)

ii. A dystopian novel about the future is a prediction of what the future will be like.

(One immediate response to “1984”, after its first publication, was that Orwell was predicting the future; when the actual year 1984 eventually arrived, the then prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, said that Orwell had got it all wrong. The idea of a big brother figure crushing opposition was preposterous. Orwell was downhearted by the contemporary reviews of “1984” which saw it as a prophecy or prediction. Thinking people had misread the novel, he said he thought he had “ballsed it up”.)

Again, not so: the novel is often a satire of a particular aspect of society, e.g., hedonism in “Brave New World”, or even a fantasy which asks, in the tradition of the best science fiction, “What would happen if…?” In “Children of Men”, P.D. James posits the question, what would happen if all human beings became infertile…? Having thought about the question, “What would happen if…?” the writer unfolds the possible answer in the narrative.

Possible points for further discussion, time permitting:

- Is dystopian literature primarily British, born of the British psyche? Is there such a thing as “the British psyche”? Is American Literature more optimistic than British literature (perhaps because of the influence of Hollywood)?

We might compare episodes from two science fiction series, one British, one American. In the episode “I, Borg” from “Star Trek: the Next Generation”, a Borg – a malevolent cyborg – becomes more human and determines to spread humanity throughout its kind; in the 2005 “Doctor Who” episode, Dalek, a malevolent cyborg becomes more human and considers itself to be disgusting, impure as a Dalek: it commits suicide.

We might also consider that “The Hunger Games”, although a trilogy of dystopian teen novels, ends optimistically…and the American film version of “1984” gave it a happy ending, much to the disgust of Sonia Orwell, George’s widow. When she questioned the American producer about the change, he said he made it because he had “faith in human nature”. Sonia Orwell replied, “You may have faith in human nature but you’ve missed the point.”

Clearly British writers do not have a monopoly on dystopian literature: Margaret Atwood is Canadian. .

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