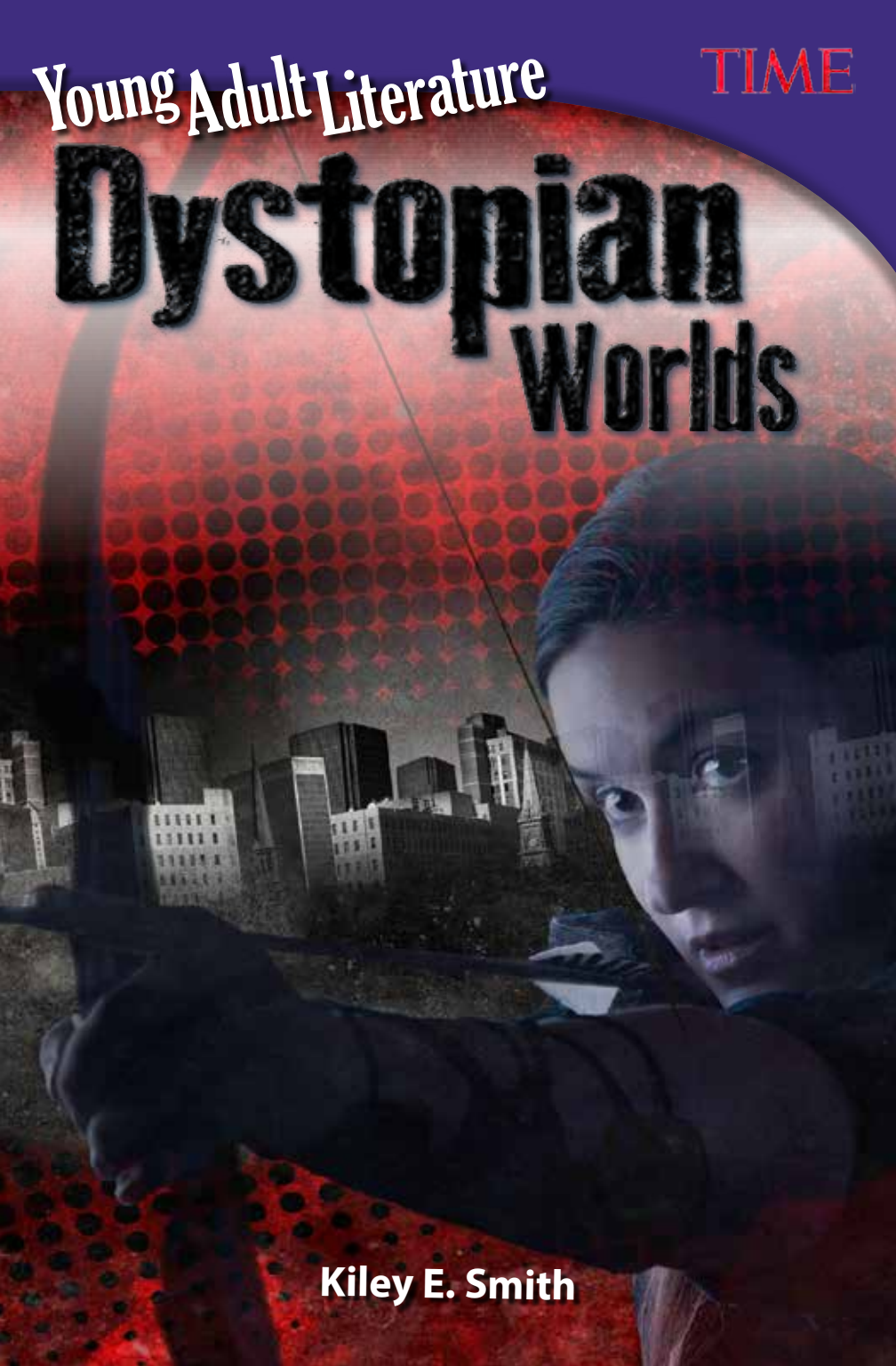

Young Adult Literature
TIME
Dystopian Worlds
Kiley E. Smith

For teachers' inspection ONLY

Table of Contents



Dystopia, Utopia, Huh-Topia!? 4
Controlling Governments 12
Rebellious Teens 16
Mind Control Backfires 22
The Spark That Triggers the End 26
Who Knows What's Out There? 30
Where in the Real World? 36
All's Fair in War and Utopia 42
Glossary 44
Index 45
Check It Out 46
Try It! 47
About the Author 48

Dystopia, Utopia, Huh-Topia!?

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What is a **dystopia**? It is a perfectly horrid society. Civilization's problems have taken over. **Discord** and unhappiness are common. Governments try to create perfect worlds, but something goes wrong. They end up with deeply troubled societies. To paraphrase the great author Leo Tolstoy, each dystopian world is unique. Yet the people are similarly unhappy.

On the other side of the coin are **utopias**. These are perfect societies. The governments are strong and fair. People are treated equally. They are well cared for. Utopian societies produce happy, loving, caring people.

Authors seem to have it backwards! Utopian societies include perfection, peace, and **prosperity**. These are ideal conditions. So why aren't authors writing more utopian books? Wouldn't it be more interesting to read about perfect worlds?

Not really. Utopia by definition has no conflict. Without conflict, there is no story. Dystopian novels focus on one of the most engaging types of conflict. More often than not, they tell of a single person against forces in the outside world. Teenagers are noted for feeling that they face the world alone. Maybe that's why dystopian books are among the most popular novels for young adults.

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YAL: The Real Story

Dystopian novels are just one subgenre of young adult literature. So, what is young adult literature, or YAL? It is a genre that first became popular in the 1960s. The themes, settings, and characters are meant to connect with a teen audience.

Dystopian novels are full of loss, violence, sickness, and death. Why do these dark themes appeal to young adults? Perhaps it's because, just like the characters in the books, young adults are discovering their places in the world around them, and that can sometimes feel as isolating and scary as a dystopia.

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Conflict

All great stories have conflict. Without conflict, there is nothing to help build excitement and interest. Dystopian stories are no different.

In these novels, the main characters, or **protagonists**, usually find themselves in conflict with the greater world. In an individual versus society conflict, the main character is hated by the government or by other people. He or she is seen as a threat to the routine way of life that people are used to. This scares people. The angry government leaders fight the threat by kidnapping or getting rid of the individual.

The dystopian world might also involve an individual in conflict with nature. In such a conflict, the main character is fighting a problem that can't be solved



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easily. The only **foreseeable** solution is finding a safe place that provides the **necessities** of life.

In an individual vs. self conflict, the protagonist fights the beasts within. This may be a battle with his or her own self-consciousness. Victory can only come by fighting the protagonist's own dysfunctions. This type of conflict is usually not central to a dystopian novel. These books most often deal with outside forces. But a protagonist may have to overcome his or her own flaws. Such flaws are at the heart of inner conflict.

Dystopia's Conflicts

Dystopian novels have central conflicts that usually fall in one of two main categories:

Individual vs. Society—In *Cinder*, by Marissa Meyer, the protagonist is a cyborg. As the book begins, it becomes clear that cyborgs are treated as second-class citizens in this dystopian society. Cinder is a cyborg fighting against her society.

Individual vs. Nature—In James Dashner's *The Scorch Trials*, nature causes major problems. A terrible disease and the extraordinary heat of the sun cause the destruction of the modern world. The protagonist, Thomas, fights against natural and human enemies.

Elements of Dystopian Worlds

Throughout young adult dystopian novels, there are recurring core themes and ideas. Name any dystopian novel, and you'll find these elements!

Fight
The universe is broken.
It has been shattered by people
who believe in power and control.
They are corrupt and evil.
A few people fight back.
They want to save the
destroyed, crumbling society—
but not always for the same reasons.

Survive
Surviving means to live another day
and see another sunrise.
Protagonists want to survive,
and they want their friends to survive.
Survival is what keeps them fighting
against the dystopian world.

Protect
The ones they love inspire protagonists
to strike back and protect those around them.
They fight to keep everyone safe and
want their families to live in peace.
The world changes because protagonists
love their families.

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Change
Not many people have changed the world or even changed their communities.
Changing society is a force that pushes people to greatness.
Protagonists want to change society, but they end up changing the world.

Love
Love is the most powerful, beautiful force in the universe.
Love for family, friends, and others motivates protagonists.
They fight back against a world that is anything but perfect.

Finish
All these protagonists fight governments that try to keep them in the dark.
They discover truths, and they fight for many reasons.
Above all, they fight to end their own dystopias once and for all.

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Reader's Guide

1. Choose a protagonist from a dystopian novel. Compare and contrast that character to the diagram on pages 20–21.
2. In what ways do the governments in dystopian worlds try to control people?
3. Look at the map on pages 36–37. In which district would you most like to live? What might that district produce? Explain your choice.
4. Why are people today interested in reading dystopian novels?