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**Visions of Utopia:
“The Great Work Begins”**

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ENG 499

Honors in the English Major

RSRCH: Visions of Utopia

Rollins College

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CHAPTER ONE

Dreams of a Better World:

The Evolution of Utopia

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias.

- Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*

Thomas More is often credited as the first person to use the term *utopia*, but the concept actually stretches back to the ancient Greeks. According to *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, “More coined this word from Greek roots, eu-topia (the place where things are well) and u-topia (no place) but it is a word which, overcoming its Latinized-Greek origins, has taken on a life of its own” (Davis 29). Utopia, as recognized in the 21st century, does not reflect its original form. Changes in philosophy and literature imposed new interpretations along with new criticisms. In this way, utopia is not stagnant, but incredibly malleable—not only has utopia manifested differently over time, but also provided the origins for dystopia. Since the 6th century B.C.E., utopia has evolved from a philosophical concept, a distant geographical place, to a vision of the future; at the same time, utopian visions fomented skeptical inquiries that set the basis for the dystopian genre.

As previously mentioned, utopia has its roots even before it was named. Around 750 B.C.E., Hesiod described the Golden Age of Cronus, an idealized time set in the mythical past. As

Doyne Dawson explains in *Cities of the Gods*, “Cronus’ time was an ancient myth, which the Greeks of the classical age did not confuse with reality . . . rather the myth envisioned a peasant paradise of spontaneous food production and total leisure; also free from sickness and aging, which removed it still from further reality” (14). These fantastical qualities, inherent to myth, ultimately separate the golden age from contemporary utopianism; nevertheless, the golden age shows the possibility for a better condition and therefore the capacity to conceive a better reality.

Although initially confined to myth, people’s capacity to imagine better conditions eventually extended to reality. As Fatima Vieira writes in “Utopia: the word and the concept,” “One of the main features of utopia as a literary genre is its relationship with reality. Utopists depart from the observation of the society they live in, note down the aspects that need to be changed and imagine a place where those problems have been solved” (7). In *Plato’s Republic*, visions of a better life became tied to civilization, setting the intellectual foundation for utopianism. As J.C. Davis states, “From Plato onwards, it was recognized that the good and wise (the philosopher) confronted a choice between the risk of corruption attendant on political engagement, and the sense of exile, or neglect of duty, inherent in a retreat to the contemplative life” (33). With this transition from myth to philosophy, dreams of a better life were complicated. By nature, utopia is inherently relative as interpretations of a better society vary from person to person. In the same vein, the best model with which to organize society to achieve those visions is also subject to interpretation. Once framed within the context of contemporary society, political argument became central to visions of a better world.

With the publication of *Utopia* in 1516, Thomas More shifted utopia from a philosophical concept into a literary genre. As Vieira states:

More's idea of utopia is, in fact, the product of the Renaissance, a period when the ancient world (namely Greece and Rome) was considered the peak of mankind's intellectual achievement, and taken as a model by Europeans; but it was also the result of a humanist logic, based on the discovery that the human being did not exist simply to accept his or her fate, but to use reason in order to build the future. (4)

In this vein, the island, Utopia, provided an alternative to the problems of 16th century England. Although contemporary utopias are often designed as futuristic, More's island existed in tandem with the society it critiqued. As such, More set a precedent in which utopian visions existed in distant geographical locations, isolated from contemporary society, and explored by visitors escaping the modern world (Pohl 60). The physical separation from the island and the rest of civilization illustrated the tension between virtue and corruption discussed in *Plato's Republic*. This isolation constructed a binary: utopia is virtuous and outside is corrupt. Given the interpretive nature of utopia, audiences found fault with More's improvement on contemporary life.

As audiences disagreed with More's vision of a perfect society, satirical pieces were produced in response. These texts worked to expose utopias as false, hypocritical, even impossible. In his article, "The New Utopians," Jeet Heer responds to this phenomenon, stating, "countering these hopes were the satirical responses of more pessimistic writers like Jonathan Swift, whose *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) can be read as an early warning about false utopias (1). These renderings triggered a shift from the geographic utopia to the futuristic utopia. As Vieira writes:

Confined to remote islands or unknown places, utopian wishes fail to be materialized. Only in the last decades of the eighteenth century are utopias to be placed in the future; and only then does the utopian wish give place to hope. The projection of the utopian wishes into the future implied a change in the very nature of utopia—and thus a derivation neologism

was born. From eu/utopia, the good/non-place, we move to euchronia, the good place in the future. (9)

By constructing utopian societies as futuristic, depicted societies became more credible as the division in time provided potential for society to evolve. In doing so, hope for a better world became more feasible, as Vieira discussed. At the same time, however, the intense skepticism surrounding utopia set the foundation for dystopia. According to Vieira, the word *dystopia* derives as a response to the word *utopia*:

The first recorded use of dystopia (which is another derivation neologism) dates back to 1868, and is to be found in a parliamentary speech in which John Stuart Mill tried to find a name for a perspective which was opposite to that of utopia: if utopia was commonly seen as ‘too good to be practicable,’ then dystopia was ‘too bad to be practicable.’ (16)

These definitions of utopia and dystopia construct them as opposites and reflect a black and white outlook on the world. However, utopia and dystopia are intimately connected and often operate within grey areas. For one, the more utopia is portrayed as problematic, the more it reflects dystopia. In his article, “Apocalypse, Utopia, and Dystopia: Old Paradigms Meet a New Millennium,” Knickerbocker emphasizes this tension stating, “one person’s utopia may appear quite dystopian to another” (437). This interpretive quality is present even within the fictional texts. For instance, some characters perceive the society in which they live as utopic while others perceive the same society as dystopic. In this way, utopia and dystopia echo each other, especially in contemporary literature.

As a genre, utopian literature has all but eroded. Nevertheless, utopianism is still present in contemporary literature—it just manifests differently. In his article, “The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction,” Raffaella Baccolini articulates:

Utopia is maintained in dystopia, traditionally a bleak depressing genre with no space for hope in a story: only by considering dystopia as a warning can we as readers hope to escape such a dark future. . . but recent novels such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* . . . allow readers and protagonists to hope: the ambiguous, open endings maintain the utopian impulse within the work. (520)

Rather than presenting fully functioning utopian societies, dystopian and apocalyptic texts offer glimpses of utopian ideals; furthermore, these glimpses are usually founded on returning to a simpler and (perceived) traditional life. In a similar vein, the essay, "Our Posthuman Adolescence," introduces "transformative utopia," which "permit[s] Young Adult literature to preserve its habitual hopefulness by treating the dystopia as a way of constituting a better world" (Gooding 112). According to Gooding, dystopian works allow young audiences to confront dark themes that reflect contemporary society as a means to achieve utopia (126). However, this ethic often extends into adult dystopian and apocalyptic literature as well. As Knickerbocker states, "it appears that utopianists have given up on fighting one master narrative with another. They interrogate, they suggest possible paths, but they do not propose answers or outline projects, nor are any utopias or dystopias presented as static or perfect" (349). Although the utopian genre is less present in the 21st century, utopian ideals remain central to modern literature.

For the most part, these visions of a better world are not organized into "blueprint plans" reflective of 16th century literature (Viera 22). Instead, utopianism maintains the futuristic quality from the late 19th century, but not in the shape of a fully fleshed society. Instead, the utopian idealism to create a better world is often more ambiguous. This phenomenon is exemplified in the concluding line from Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: "The Great Work Begins"* (329). The nature of "The Great Work" remains unclear and therefore open to interpretation. Interpretation,

however, is inherent to utopia. In apocalyptic and dystopian literature, characters struggle, survive, and work toward something better, even if that something better is not realized within the text. Although “The Great Work” is often unspecific and only on the horizon, dystopian and apocalyptic literature provide avenues to work through the problems of today.

Utopian and dystopian texts provide contrasting visions, but the genres share a common goal: creating a better world. In this vein, Heer writes, “dark predictions have always had a sunny counterpart—the dream of a better world. Just as heaven and hell are complementary destinations, so are utopia and dystopia rivalrous siblings, each offering radically different outcomes, but both concerned with how humanity can shape its common destiny” (1). Although these approaches manifest themselves differently, both genres are inherently nostalgic, upholding the past as more honorable than the present. As Fontaine Maury Belford writes in “Yesterday’s Dream, Tomorrow’s Necessity”:

In writing a scenario for the ideal present, futurists look backward to the utopias of the past. The irony that defines us is that we live in a moment that was once the locus of a visionary’s dream; that the present is the past’s future. In the graveyard-visions that constitutes our culture is there a key to our present self-destruction? What kind of present would ensure the future for which we seek? (229)

These questions are essential to dystopian and apocalyptic narratives when chronology comes into play. As Bedford suggests, the fact that stories are set in the future does not separate them from the past or the present. Although apocalyptic and dystopian texts envision the future, they provide a critique of the present and uphold the past as a golden age.

In contemporary works, dystopian and apocalyptic texts are not inherently pessimistic; instead, utopian idealism, predicated on hope for a better world, manifests itself in a return to the

past. For instance, dystopian and apocalyptic works often condemn industrialized societies that foment poverty, corruption, and ecological distress. Rather, the texts idealize smaller communities that practice agrarianism and hunting and gathering. This shift in societal models reflects a romanticized version of a simpler life. By integrating aspects from the past into the future, societies return to a more economically, socially, and ecologically balanced state. As articulated in “Rural URBAN Eutopias,” “[u]topian propositions usually represent non-existent, ideal, imaginary or even romantic places of the past . . . Common among these places are remembered atmospheres of harmony, peacefulness and well-being, and experiments in social order” (Tabb 1). In this vein, authors create societies that construct the traditional idealized past as superior to the present. However, traditional is relative. As times change, so do interpretations of the past. Given that the past constantly expands, what constitutes tradition constantly expands as well. Now, utopia manifests itself in apocalyptic and dystopian texts; however, the impulse to envision a better condition remains consistent in a return to the glorified past. In the following chapters, I examine apocalyptic and dystopian texts, focusing on hope for the future especially in relation to the past. To add perspective, I also assess a counter narrative—*Station Eleven* for apocalyptic and *Never Let Me Go* for dystopian—at the end of each chapter that challenges genre expectations. In doing so, I hope to further emphasize the inherent relativity of utopian visions and of the idealized past.

CHAPTER TWO

Apocalyptic Literature:

Chaos and Rebirth

I sat in the dark and thought: There's no big apocalypse. Just an endless procession of little ones.

- Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean, Signal to the Noise

Along with utopia and dystopia, the apocalypse also stems from the Greek language. As Briohny Doyle states in his article, “The Postapocalyptic Imagination,” “Deriving from the Greek *apokaluptein*, ‘to uncover,’ apocalypse has traditionally designated a narrative in which catastrophe precedes revelation of a new world or truth (Doyle 99). In apocalyptic literature, characters grapple with the transition from before to after civilization. As stated in “Old Paradigms Meet a New Millennium,” “The term apocalypse has come to be commonly used as a ‘synonym for ‘disaster’ or ‘cataclysm,’ ignoring that ‘the myth comprehends both cataclysm *and* millennium, tribulation *and* triumph, chaos *and* order . . .” (Knickerbocker 346). In “Critical Dystopia Reconsidered,” Hui-chuan Chang articulates, “the traditional apocalypse exemplifies ‘three basic elements of apocalyptic writing . . . Destruction, Judgment, and Regeneration” (Chang 12). This regeneration is essential. While apocalyptic literature no doubt deals with dark themes, it also provides a platform for utopian ideals to unfold as characters confront the events responsible for society’s collapse. As a result of this confrontation, characters often reject their own time or the

time leading up to the apocalypse as problematic. Instead, characters look to a “time before” to inspire their future.

Stephen King’s *The Stand*, set in the 1990s, offers an alternative future in which a military-developed virus reduces the population by 99.4% (King 28). In the epidemic’s aftermath, the remaining population divides into the good, who settle in Boulder, and the evil, who are drawn to Las Vegas. From the start, time is a central theme as one character states, “I looked up and saw the clock had gone red” (King xix). After this moment, everything changes, signifying the end of time, or more specifically, the end of the modern age. Near the beginning, King establishes the US government as corrupt as political leaders release the virus to ensure other nations share the same fate. The choice to ensure the entire world’s destruction establishes the selfish ethic of contemporary society, setting a foundation for the rest of the novel. As characters build a new society, prioritizing the good of the community over the individual comes to define the common good.

King exposes the corruption of the modern age, instead, upholding visions of a simpler society. As Dick, one of the characters bound for Boulder, states later on in the novel, “Maybe the old ways are the best” (King 593). Exactly which “old ways” or more accurately, which “olden days” he references is unclear. As he reminisces over his wife’s home made bread, stating, “give me three slices of bread and some strawberry jam and I could die happy,” Dick aligns “the old ways” with a time when people baked their own bread (King 593). To Dick, an actual time is irrelevant. Instead, his idealization of homemade bread aligns “best” with his own interpretation of traditional. In “A Useful Knowledge of the Present is Rooted in the Past,” Raffaella Baccolini articulates, “very few utopias aspire to perfection, while most look back to idealized or

romanticized past that is then projected into the future” (114). In the aftermath of the virus, knowledge of the past increases in value as fewer people alive remember it.

Mother Abigail’s character is the most powerful in the series due to her role as not only God’s messenger, but also the collective memory. At the start of the novel, Franny expresses concern at being a woman in this postmodern world, believing she is too frail to function well and survive without male protection. With the collapse of society, Franny hypothesizes that a shift will occur in which masculine and physical strength will be privileged. However, Mother Abigail represents an exact foil to Franny’s interpretation of women’s place in the new world. At one hundred and eight years old, Mother Abigail is by no means powerful in a strictly physical sense. Instead, her age lends itself to a new kind of power. Rather than physical strength, she is powerful through her knowledge and her connection to God. Not only is Mother Abigail enlightened by this connection, but she also is graced with the power to communicate through dreams, motivating an entire population of scattered survivors to come together.

However, Abigail’s power extends beyond her role as God’s messenger. With the virus depleting such larger numbers, including older generations, the loss of history is at stake. As Baccolini states:

History, its knowledge, and memory are therefore dangerous elements that can give the dystopian citizen a potential instrument of resistance. But, whereas the protagonists, in classical dystopia, usually do not get any control over history and the past, in the critical dystopia the recovery of history is an important element for the survival of hope. (115)

Although I would not classify *The Stand* as dystopian, the importance of recovering the past still translates to the apocalyptic genre. For characters in *The Stand*, understanding the past becomes an asset in terms of survival. Although her grandchildren wish to install a flushing toilet and

connect city water to her home, Abigail refuses modern amenities (King 489). God tells her, “Abby, you are going to need your hand-pump. You enjoy your electricity all you want, Abby, but you keep those oil-lamps of yours full and keep the wicks trimmed. . .” (King 490) As a result, Abigail is prepared to adapt to the new standard of living, reminiscent of an earlier time, that most survivors are unaccustomed to, having been raised in the later part of the 20th century. In this way, she is a leader, guiding survivors to a simpler, but more sustainable way of life. In this way, Mother Abigail is the collective memory. When everyone dies, citizens risk the loss of history. Therefore, time and preservation of time is an important theme within the apocalyptic narrative, expressed through use of journals, documents, and artifacts.

Most apocalyptic societies, like *The Stand*, exist either during civilization’s collapse or hundreds, even thousands of years thereafter. In contrast, Justin Cronin’s *The Passage* takes place in the past, present, and future—bridging the gap between genre tropes. The story is centered around a virus outbreak that transforms infected individuals into creatures reminiscent of vampires. The population reduces rapidly as those that survive the virus still must adapt to the dangers posed by the violent infected that hunt people by night. A century later, the remaining population lives in colonies designed to protect citizens from the “virals” or infected. Normally, apocalypse texts illustrate a society’s potential to work toward a better society without that new society being realized. However, the fluidity of time in *The Passage* allows audiences to experience different stages of the apocalypse—before, during, and after. This is done through emails, journals, and documents which are integrated into the narrative. In a journal entry, for instance, Auntie writes, “there was a lot we didn’t know. Such as what happened to Europe or France or China . . .” (Cronin 292). In the same vein, Vorhee states, “The truth is we don’t know. Some people say the quarantine worked, that the rest of the world is just humming right along without us” (Cronin 748). In this

way, journals serve to unite characters existing in different stages of the apocalypse through emphasizing their curiosity of the unknown.

Meanwhile, Cronin complements these journals with official documents. For instance, one document labeled, “University of South Wales, Indo-Australian Republic April 16-21, 10003 A.V.,” indirectly answers Auntie and Vorhee’s questions (Cronin 292). Not only does the date indicate that humans survived 1000 years after the apocalypse, but also answers the question: what happened to the rest of the world? Assuming AV stands for after virus, this document indicates that people outside North America survived. Furthermore, “Republic” indicates that government exists and with it some version of civilization. In this way, the apocalypse is “a process, not an event” (Knickerbocker 349). Through portraying the apocalypse at different levels, Cronin realizes not only utopian ideals, but also evidence of a better world. Although *The Passage* provides hope for civilization to return, this phenomenon is actually realized in the text of *Alas, Babylon*. In light of this, I will more thoroughly explore the construction of the society developed in this novel.

Published in 1959, Pat Frank’s *Alas, Babylon*, provides an alternative history in which Russia dropped nuclear bombs on major U.S. cities. At the center of the story is Fort Repose, a small river town in Florida. Focalized through the viewpoint of multiple citizens, the text provides insight into small town life coinciding with the breakdown of civilization. At the start of the story, the protagonist, Randy, leads an average life. In addition to being a Korean War veteran, he is characterized through his loss in a town election and drinking problem. However, Randy reaches a turning point when his brother is assumed dead in the bombing. As previously agreed upon by the two brothers, Randy takes in his sister-in-law and her children—an act that provides Randy with a newfound responsibility. Not only does Randy quit drinking, but he eventually transitions into the community’s leader. Although Fort Repose was spared in the bombing, the government

isolates the entire state of Florida due to radiation contamination, leaving the small town to fend for itself. Rather than falling into decay, however, citizens band together in the heat of crisis and eventually flourish against the odds.

In his article “Stripping the Artifice: The Beneficial Apocalypse of Pat Frank’s *Alas, Babylon*,” Rod Romesburg discusses the apocalypse as a means to improve society, emphasizing how characters’ lives improve as a result of the war. As he articulates, “Most popular apocalypse stories tend to end with a sense of hope rather than dread, with surviving humans emerging from cataclysm, scathed but wiser, and better prepared to face their new world” (Romesburg 110). Throughout the novel, Frank connects survival with lessons from older generations. In doing so, he condemns contemporary society, implying that the future should reflect a “time before” to foster a more meaningful way of life.

Frank disillusiones audiences to institutional power by demonstrating the speed with which institutions fall. As Dan Gunn, the town doctor, tells Randy, “You react to crisis in the right way . . . Some nations and people melt in the heat of crisis and come apart like fat in the pan. Others meet the challenge and harden. I think you’re going to harden” (Frank Loc 2447). By aligning nations with individuals, Gunn forces the audience to recognize fundamental similarities between the two; in turn, this connection forces audiences to reconsider nation. Ordinarily, nation, and by extension the United States, is upheld as an inherently powerful force, greater than any individual. However, the annihilation of major cities across the states exposes its simultaneous fragility. Although nation is normally presented as outlasting individuals, the aftermath of the bombing suggests the opposite is true. Thus, the bombing creates an inversion of social norms in which individuals outlast nation. However, this inversion manifests itself in a surprising way. In his article, Romesburg articulates:

Fort Repose represents a small town America that never was, a Disney-ish neighborhood in which citizens work hard, live truly, and share values. In an atmospheric bubble that saves them from radioactive fallout and a geographic bubble of radioactive wastelands separating them from the rest of the country, they exist outside of time, seemingly unaffected by the events of the present or prejudices of the past. By blasting away the contamination of civilization, the bombs have built a small Utopia—a perfect geographic and achronologic nowhere. (117)

Cities are the powerhouses of contemporary civilization, fomenting progress that eventually trickles into smaller communities; however, Frank problematizes the direction of that progress. In this vein, cities represent contemporary capitalist society while small town communities represent a return to tradition. As the small population of Fort Repose survives while dense urban centers are demolished, Frank critiques contemporary civilization. Looking back on Dann Gunn's statement—"Some nations and people melt in the heat of crisis and come apart like fat in the pan. Others meet the challenge and harden"—the quick destruction of cities and their failed resurrection represent a failure to adapt and by extension represent the failure of the nation to adapt. Again, the association between people and nation works to dismantle the traditional construction of nation. With this understanding comes a new outlook on the world—in the same way a person can die, so can a nation. Given the death of cities and the survival of small communities, the bombing suggests that the current model of civilization is flawed. Instead, the survival of small town communities suggests that the future should reflect the past.

Although Fort Repose was spared in the bombing, its citizens were not spared from hardship. In the strike's initial aftermath, citizens struggled to adapt to the new standard of living—a struggle rooted in reliance on modern amenities. As citizens scramble to collect supplies, for

instance, the lifestyle of the 20th century limited their capacity to foresee coming events and respond accordingly. Comparatively, the older community applied earlier experience to the crisis, enabling them to better adapt. As Randy states, “The people in Fort Repose who remembered rationing from the second World War also remembered what goods had been in short supply, back in ‘forty-two and ‘forty-three, and bought accordingly” (Frank Loc 647). Similarly, Mother Abigail served as the collective memory in *The Stand*, assisting younger generations to adapt to the post-apocalyptic society. As demonstrated here, memory became similarly connected to survival, increasing in value as a result of the nuclear war.

In this vein, younger generations without such memories not only fail to collect proper supplies, but also fail to imagine a world without modern technology. To illustrate, Randy fails to consider the full ramifications of the bombing as he gathers supplies. As he reflects, “He had been a fool. Instead of buying fresh meat, he should have bought canned meat by the case. If there was one thing he should have foreseen, it was the loss of electricity (Frank Loc 2760). Even in the wake of crisis, Randy’s privileged lifestyle narrows the scope of his imagination. As a result of this narrow outlook, Randy is unable to imagine obvious consequences to the bombing, which in turn put himself and his family at risk of starvation. Although modern amenities are often characterized as marks of progress, the bombing exposed the level to which the community depended on such commodities; furthermore, it exposed the problematic nature of this dependence as it ultimately hindered citizens from adapting to their new reality. In this way, Frank problematizes the 20th century lifestyle, instead promoting a return to a simpler life.

As signified by Randy’s failure to collect proper supplies, the modern age creates a disconnect between people and their own elemental needs. Frank emphasizes the inauthenticity of the nation’s capitalist system. After realizing his deadly mistake, Randy attempts to barter for

essentials, offering an outrageous amount of money for salt—at least, an outrageous amount in the pre-bombing society. As he quickly realizes, however, money no longer serves as a meaningful form of capital. In response to Randy’s offer, the grocer, Eric, tells him, “Keep it! I don’t want money. What the hell’s money good for? You can’t drive it and you can’t eat it and it won’t even fix a flat” (Frank Loc 2241). This exchange demonstrates that the bombing created a chain effect, propelling not only a lifestyle shift, but also a systemic shift. As civilization breaks down, its associated institutions follow suit. As a result, what would have been an outrageous offer only days before, is now worthless as a new economic model emerges. As Romesburg articulates, “Without the artificial system in place to provide money with value, survivors are forced to place value upon things themselves” (Romesburg 112). Ultimately, this transition exposes money as something people collectively choose to believe in. If people no longer believe in money, it loses its value—just like the construct of nation. As Eric questions the value of money, lambasting it as something he cannot “eat,” “drive,” or use to “fix,” he emphasizes its lack of functionality. In doing so, he provides insight into a new economic system that defines an object’s value based on its utility (Frank Loc 2241). Given money’s indirect utility, it is suddenly worthless. By exposing the limitations of money, Frank in turn questions the authenticity of 20th century society.

As citizens of Fort Repose pin goods down to essentialist values, Frank reveals the flaw in the former society’s value system, especially in terms of material goods. Looking back on Gunn’s assertion that some people will survive and some will not, here we see the ramifications of this division manifest themselves. After the bombing, citizens who follow the new economic model’s principles fare better than those clinging to now outdated capitalist principles. Rita, Randy’s former girlfriend, reinforces this binary. Living in Pistolville, the poorer side of town, she amasses once extravagant possessions that, as a result of the attack, are worthless. However, Rita sees the

new economic model as an opportunity to improve her circumstances, prophesying a return to the pre-bombing status quo:

I'm looking ahead, Randy. This war isn't going to last forever and when it's over I'm going to have everything I never had before and plenty besides, maybe to sell. I was only a kid after the last big war but I remember how my dad had to pay through the nose for an old jalopy. Do you know what that Jag cost me?' She laughed. 'A case of beans, three bottles of ketchup, and six cans of deviled ham. For a Jag! Say, as soon as things get back to normal those three TV sets will be worth their weight in gold. (Frank Loc 3625)

Reflecting on Eric's statement, Rita's hoarded jewelry, televisions, and sport cars cannot be "[eaten]" "[driven]" or used to "fix" (Frank Loc 2241). What good is a television without electricity, or a Jag without gasoline? The only value these goods offer is aesthetic or status driven—both of which translate poorly to the present value system. Although Rita does not see this, exchanging food for aesthetic goods is not a bargain. This failure is further highlighted by her use of the phrase "worth their weight in gold" given that gold provides no direct utility and therefore no longer holds economic value (Frank Loc 3625). In the same way Randy failed to foresee the loss of electricity, the capitalist mindset again corrupts good judgment—unless Rita's vision is realized, and the former society is resurrected. However, Rita's attempt to exploit the new status quo ultimately backfires, as Dann Gunn points out, "They're radioactive. That gold is a hot isotope of gold. They've been poisoning you" (Frank Loc 3763). In an ironic twist, all her collected goods are contaminated with radiation.

While Rita bears a visible mark from the contaminated jewelry, her brother dies from exposure to the nuclear radiation. Therefore, her hoarded possessions are not only worthless, but also deadly. What's more, in her attempt to accumulate wealth, Rita actually gives up goods with

capital value in the present market. Given this context, Rita's plan problematizes ostentatious displays of wealth, serves as an obvious warning consumerist mentality, and encourages readers to view excess with a more critical eye. In light of this, Rita's fantasy of "plenty besides" is condemned, encouraging readers to reconsider the ramifications of "[getting] back to normal" (Frank Loc 3625). With this framework comes the notion that perhaps society should not return to normal, or at least not this version of normal. Instead, Frank privileges the new status quo and condemns those that adhere to capitalist mindsets; rather than valuing material goods, people should base the value of their possessions on utility. In this vein, Romesburg explains:

In this new reality, everyone owns their own labor, and the American dream of prosperity again belongs to those who work the hardest and employ their skills, rather than those who merely own and invest capital. Emphasizing this further, Frank punishes with radiation poisoning those who attempt to cheat this model by scavenging jewelry from areas closer to the bombsites. The apocalypse has replaced an artificial economy with one more ostensibly real, rewarding, and just. (112)

As Romesburg suggests, the poisoning reflects the corrupt nature of the capitalist society. Therefore, the transition in economic model provides an opportunity for a more substantive life. As money is exposed as a social construction, so comes the realization that citizens have the power to design an economic system that better suits their needs. In the same vein, citizens have the power to construct a more meaningful society based on the common good.

It is not ploys to exploit the crisis that ultimately improve citizens' conditions, but the willingness to adjust their way of life. Rather than working to rebuild the collapsed society, the Fort Repose community survives by reflecting on lessons from older generations. As Randy and Rita each demonstrated, the convenience of the modern age disconnects people from their

elemental needs, so that they do not even understand what they need to survive. Given that the younger generations are so removed from such survival outside the modern bubble, they must reflect on a “time before” to learn to adapt to their present situation. To illustrate, Randy “[remembers] hunting deer with his father, and shooting his first deer with the buckshot from the double twenty” (Frank Loc 2400). This skill, passed down by the older generation, enables him to feed himself and his family after supplies from the grocery store runs out. In this way, Frank demonstrates that depending on institutions provides only a temporary means for survival while the skills passed down from earlier generations provide a more sustaining one. In this way, Frank privileges the past over contemporary society. Similarly, Randy fails to catch fish while Peyton, Randy’s young niece, seeks out The Pastor, who has lived in Fort Repose all his life. By following his instructions, Peyton successfully catches fish, which Randy and his subordinates failed to do. In this vein, Romesburg writes:

Life does not so much begin anew but retreats to an older model more akin to the experience of the characters’ grand-or great-grandparents. While the connotations of the “apocalypse” and “optimism” seem initially contradictory, Frank’s novel reminds us that the apocalypse in its initial sense is ultimately more about promise than destruction. *Alas, Babylon* in many ways aligns with traditional apocalypse stories, employing the apocalypse to envision a community purified of the contaminants of modern times. (Romesburg 110)

Randy and his peers never think to consult the Pastor for advice. This failure aligns with earlier Randy’s underestimation of the post-blast reality. His generation is so conditioned to a certain lifestyle and way of thinking, they underestimate the value and knowledge of the older generation. As a child, Peyton represents the future while, as an old man, the Pastor represents the past. Given

the success of their interaction, Frank emphasizes that the past and the future should go together. Therefore, hope for the future rests on returning to the past.

Throughout the text, this philosophy also manifests in man's relationship to the natural world. For instance, Randy ruminates on the robust quail population of his father's youth and the dramatic decrease that has taken place since (Frank Loc 2393). In the months following the bombing, however, he observes a change:

In October, armadillos began to grow scarce in the Fort Repose area, but the Henry's flock of chickens had increased and the sow again farrowed. Also, ducks arrived in enormous numbers from the North—more than Randy ever before had seen. Wild turkeys, which before The Day had been hunted almost to extermination in Timucuan County, suddenly were common. Randy fashioned himself a quail call, and shot one or two every week. Quail roamed the groves, fields, and yards in great conveys. (Frank Loc 5236)

Armadillos are a non-native species to Florida, known to degrade soil quality and spread disease. What's more, human development forced the species out of their native habitat and into southern states including Florida (Schaefer and Hostetler 1). Given the poor reputations of armadillos and their status as non-native, their reduction in population suggests something positive for the greater environment. This implies that with fewer humans, the species returned to their native habitat. At one point, Randy "wondered whether armadillos were good eating (Loc 4556 Frank). Given this context, the audience could also assume the sudden scarcity resulted from people now hunting in greater numbers. Before the collapse, the average citizen of Fort Repose would not have deigned to eat armadillos, much less relied on them as a major food staple. As hunting becomes more popular by necessity, however, people actively participated in reducing the population of species a species that harms the local environment. This participation provides an opportunity for

redemption, allowing citizens to reverse the environmental problem originally created by people. The armadillos' dwindling numbers suggests that the nuclear blast purged the environment of exotic species, but on a larger scale, the other harmful intrusions man imposed. In doing so, Frank illustrates the resilience of the environment, its potential to heal, and the potential for redemption. In doing so, he shows the possibility for hope for a better world.

At the same time, the increasing quail population is also symbolic. As native species, their return to the habitat suggests a rebirth of the natural world. Shortly after the nuclear explosion, Randy states:

In his father's youth, this section of Florida had been a hunter's paradise, with quail, dove, duck, and deer in plenty, and even black bear and a rare panther. Now the quail were scattered and often scarce . . . Randy had not shot quail for twelve years. When visitors noticed his gun rack and asked about quail shooting, he always laughed and said, 'Those guns are too shoot people who try to shoot quail. The quail were friends . . .

(Frank Loc 2393)

Although Randy does not explicitly explain the reason the quail population decreased in size, the change from one generation to the next suggests contemporary society is at fault. Presumably, this fault is connected to some change that the occurred between the two generations such as expanding development or increase in hunting. Therefore, the resurgence of the quails suggests the environment somehow realigned with natural conditions. As mentioned earlier, it was Randy's father who taught him to hunt in the first place. As citizens rediscover practices from a time before, Fort Repose returns to its former state of "paradise" (Frank Loc 2393). In this vein, the increase in quail suggests that something has changed that corresponds to the way of life in Randy's father's generation and therefore something more sustaining. By returning to a time that mimics the past,

the natural world is rejuvenated to its former glory. As Romesburg articulates, “The text implies there is a natural, originary state, a secular Garden of Eden, to which the apocalypse can help us return” (Romesburg 111). Whereas readers might expect environmental health to worsen after the bombing, the apocalypse instead returns the environment to a more stable condition. Just as Fort Repose changes from a consumer-driven society to one based on principles, the quails return. The restoration of the environment validates that the new model of society, upholding it as more sustainable than the one before. As citizens of Fort Repose live in a more authentic environment, they in turn lead more authentic lives.

Like *Alas, Babylon*, characters in Edan Lepucki’s *California* recognize problems at work in contemporary society and instead seek out a simpler way of life. The novel takes place with civilization on the brink of collapse—no oil, electricity, and no government. As wealthy citizens move into exclusive Communities the less privileged dwell in eroding cities or else escape to the wilderness. The story centers on the marriage between Frida and Cal, a young married couple fleeing Los Angeles to live alone in the wilderness of California in hopes of a better, simpler existence. For nearly two years, Frida and Cal flourish on their homestead, growing their own food, hunting game, and using the river as a water source. Once Frida learns she is pregnant, however, the need for more human support drives them to abandon their remote home, eventually coming across a community called The Land. Throughout the text, there is a palpable tension between nostalgia for the former society, and acknowledging its role in creating the current state of collapse. This is further presented through contrasting descriptions of the pre-collapse society, and descriptions of the new world. Even as Frida yearns for the former society’s luxuries, she condemns that society for creating the current standard of living. This is especially exemplified by Frida’s collection of “artifacts.” As Frida explains:

Those doodads were probably the whole reason America had gone to hell, the plastic seeping poisons, filling up landfills. What foolishness. But she loved the turkey baster precisely because it still had its tag. She loved its newness: the pure glass of the cylinder, its fragility, and the plastic butter-yellow bulb still chalky to the touch. It inhaled and exhaled air like the first time. She had to keep it a secret. It belonged only to her, and the secret of it had become as precious as the object itself (Lepucki Loc 75).

Even as Frida romanticizes the old society, she recognizes her fascination with the “doodads” as shallow, even expressing guilt. Through this recognition, she suggests that a shift in lifestyle is necessary. As she moves between descriptions of her old world, and descriptions of her new world, the story embodies what Smith refers to “forward backwardness of the [apocalypse] genre” (Smith 290). Even as Frida collects artifacts of modern society, she shows preference for a simpler state of being, thinking:

Cal had simply thrown himself into his gardening projects. He argued that if the rich forsook them, the country might be better off. ‘Maybe I’ll run for office,’ he said, holding up a basket of onions. ‘I’ll run on a vegetable platform.’ He was joking, but Frida thought what Cal was doing made sense. He taught people how to grow their own food. This was necessary. After all, his expertise had kept them alive. (Lepucki Loc 1126)

In this way, Frida problematizes the greediness of the Communities in abandoning the rest of the population. Instead, she looks to the possibility for average citizens to grow their own food as representation of hope—hope for the less privileged to survive without the protection of the Communities. Although this skill allows Frida and Cal to survive in the wilderness, this lifestyle turns out to not be a safe in the long term. With the threat of pirates, people who fled to the wilderness instead band together out of necessity, forming small communities similar to those in

The Passage. This development of communities represents a step toward a different interpretation of traditional.

After a turn of events, Frida and Cal end up living in a Community under false identities. Although this model of life provides security, the Community's insistence on a return to traditional gender roles is troubling. The ending is ambiguous, with Frida and Cal complying with gender expectations in order to blend in. *California* is not unhopeful as Frida and Cal survive to raise their child. As Frida and Cal move from urban to hunter gatherer to agrarian to suburban life, encountering issues within every stage of the American Dream, there is an underlying commentary on the varying nature of "traditional" and the problems associated with glorifying any version of the past. In this way, *California* breaks away from *Alas, Babylon*. However, Frida and Cal's survival as well as their upcoming baby shows promise for the future.

Like *California*, Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* transitions away from the uncomplicated glorification of the past portrayed in *Alas, Babylon*. In Mandel's apocalyptic story, a mysterious virus suddenly spreads, severely decreasing the global population. The story opens with a production of *King Lear*, starring Kirsten, a six-year-old, alongside Arthur, a movie star past his prime. Just as the play begins, Arthur dies and within days, civilization collapses. Twenty years later, the population has been dramatically reduced and Kirsten navigates the new world as an actress in a traveling Shakespeare troupe. Similar to *The Stand* and *The Passage*, the story is focalized through a variety of characters who share a common, but at first ambiguous connection. The story is deeply nostalgic, moving back and forth between the present and the past. *Station Eleven* works as an inversion of traditional patterns in apocalyptic texts because it romanticizes the 21st century.

As characters learn to survive in the newly apocalyptic world, the recent past is upheld as the ultimate golden age. To reconcile a harsh, new reality, thoughts of the past serve as a source of comfort. Stranded in the airport during the virus outbreak, Arthur's best friend, Clark Thompson, reflects, "Think of anything else. If not the future, the past: dancing with Arthur when they were young in Toronto. The taste of Orange Julius, that sugary drink he'd only ever tasted in Canadian shopping malls . . ." (Mandel 240). In apocalyptic literature, reflections of the past often produce new interpretations of the 21st century as problematic. As previously discussed, in *Alas, Babylon*, objects that were once coveted, even celebrated as status markers lost their value after the nuclear blast. Given this precedent, readers would likely expect Clark's reverie to correspond with this pattern, but Mandel's novel defies genre expectations. As Doyle articulates, "If we imagine the end of the world as a defense against the apparent immutability and permanence of contemporary socio-cultural and politico-economic oppression, we necessarily bear witness to the apocalyptic logic that underpins capitalism itself" (Doyle 101). In this vein, "sugary drinks" align with nonessential food groups, connecting to excess and frivolity while malls are hubs for consumerism. In Frank's "back to Eden" narrative, any allusion to malls would likely inspire criticism—some epiphany tying them to society's decaying morals. During Clark's reverie, he does not demonstrate a new enlightened perspective, however. Instead, thoughts of sugar, malls, and youth inspire nostalgia, providing a relief from the current state of crisis. Against genre expectations, Clark's perspective does not shift to condemn contemporary society, but gleams a more romantic hue instead.

The past is intimately connected to characters' perceptions of the post-apocalyptic world. As Doyle explains, "the old world is not replaced in the wake of catastrophe but refigured by it. Postapocalypse, then, is not a technological end point but is positioned as transitional and haunted

by memories of the pre-catastrophe world” (Doyle 101). During this “transitional” period, characters in *Station Eleven* appear deeply preoccupied with the time that came before, aligning with Doyle’s assessment. For members of the symphony, conversations are often dedicated to the old world with topics ranging from *Star Trek* to refrigerators. One evening, members of the symphony unpack while others sit around the fire, engaging in the following dialogue: “Air-conditioning came out of a vent,” August confirmed. “You’d press a button, and whoosh! Cold air. I had one in my bedroom” . . . “Oh Alexandra said. ‘So it was electricity or gas?’ . . . ‘Electricity the tuba said. ‘Airconditioners were electric’” (Mandel 121). Even though the nuances between electricity and gas are irrelevant in their current situation, the shared interest these characters demonstrate their preoccupation.

As characters travel through wilderness, decaying towns, and new settlements, sleeping outside every night, the possibility of controlling the temperature is understandably compelling. For Alexandra, who is too young to remember the world before, air conditioning is difficult to conceive and therefore, fascinating. Given their current lifestyle, the symphony members now interpret the possibility of electric or nonelectric as fantastical, even whimsical. What’s more these conversations appear casual and common, taking place during ordinary situations, woven into a daily fabric. The characters glean a sense of camaraderie from such interaction as a way to relate to one another’s experiences. In this way, the focus is not necessarily negative as “haunted” would imply. Instead, these discussions provide catharsis, a way to reconcile the sudden transition imposed on those who remember the pre-virus world. August’s exclaim, “whoosh!” shows the casual and benign nature of these interactions—this brand of reflection does not cause severe emotional distress. Rather than a source of pain, the past is an idealized time and characters’ preoccupation with it proves central to fostering relationships and defining identities.

Even as characters are developed in the post-society world, insights into their identities are provided through their fascinations with the old one:

When Kristen and August broke into abandoned houses—this was a hobby of theirs, tolerated by the conductor because they found useful things sometimes—August always gazed longingly at televisions. As a boy he'd been quiet and shy, obsessed with classical music. . . . When Kristen was in the houses, she searched for celebrity-gossip magazines, because once, when she was sixteen years old, she'd flipped through a magazine on a dust-blackened side table and found her past (Mandel 39, 40).

Even as television has been rendered obsolete, August still finds enough pleasure in seeking them out if only for nostalgic sentiments. Rather than forging a new identity as a young adult in the new world, Kristen searches decaying homes for clues to her childhood. Uninterested in the future's potential to shape her identity, she instead focuses on the past as a way to understand and define herself. Illustrated here, characters continue to define themselves through remnants of the fallen civilization. In this way, *Station Eleven* privileges the past over the present.

As in *California*, characters are obsessed with relics of the past. Whereas Frida views her turkey baster as a product of a problematic system, characters in *Station Eleven* do not share a difficult view of modern possessions. Collecting artifacts is not a guilty secret, but a shared and celebrated endeavor. As a way to preserve the old society, people at the airport construct the "Museum of Civilization." The project begins with an AmEx card, but eventually expands into a menagerie of objects that reflect the past, ranging from now useless Nintendo's to old motorcycle engines. Whereas in *Alas, Babylon* possessions were defined by their usefulness, to their essentialist views, the punished for, collective ambition. What's more, through this attempt a sense of unity. As Smith articulates in "Shakespeare, survival, and the seeds of civilization," "The

characters are all preoccupied with the idea that fundamental to the creation of a meaningful future for humanity, and the potential return for modernity, is the need to recover and maintain a record of the past” (Smith 295). What’s more, readers do not come to understand characters through interactions with the new world, but through interactions with the old one. Unlike most apocalyptic novels, a seemingly disproportionate amount of time is dedicated to the developing characters in the old world rather than the new world, even characters such as Arthur and Miranda who are dead in the present society.

The differences in time dedicated to before the collapse also challenges genre expectations. Where audiences well versed in apocalypse literature are conditioned to expect most character development to take place during or after the apocalypse, much of the book is dedicated to times significantly before either event. These flashbacks, ranging across decades, are not designed to weave into a complex plot or work up to a stunning twist at the end. Nevertheless, these flashbacks provide some of the most meaningful insights into characters and their relationships to one another. Comparably, time spent in the pre-apocalypse world in *The Stand* do not function this way. Text devoted to the past sets the stage for character development or else storylines dealing with a grand confrontation—at least somehow related to the apocalypse plot. Comparably, many of the sections set before the virus in *Station Eleven* are dedicated to characters who are not even alive in the post apocalypse society such as Arthur and Miranda, Arthur’s first wife and the creator of the comic book, “Station Eleven.” Although Kirsten never meets Miranda, one of her only possessions is a copy of “Station Eleven,” which Miranda wrote. As Kirsten’s is constantly on the move, the book provides consistency and influences her interpretation of the world. By extension, Miranda is one of the most consistent and nurturing influences on her life, showing the potential for the past to affect the future.

In contrast to *California*'s idealized depictions of agrarian and hunter-gatherer life, hunting is not looked upon as utopian or a romantic return to a simpler life, but as a grudging necessity for survival. At the novel's end, the sight of electricity in the distance sparks hope, signifying a return to the 21st century's comforts rather than a return to "traditional": "In the distance, pinpricks of light arranged into a grid. There, plainly visible on the side of a hill some miles distant: a town, or a village, whose streets were lit up with electricity" (Mandel 311). As Smith articulates, "Indeed the signs of rebirth, the movement from primitivism to early modernity described previously, are evident in Kristin's time: 'the world was softening,' we are told that 'it's been a very quiet decade' (145, 148). At the end of the book, the characters have a tantalizing glimpse of a settlement which appears to have restored electrical power—a sign of modernity returning, and perhaps, order restored" (Smith 294). For *Station Eleven*'s characters, hope for the future is tied to a return, or at least some semblance of a return, to their lost civilization.

In contrast to other apocalyptic texts like *The Passage*, *The Stand*, and *California*, *Station Eleven* is uninterested in the virus as a reflection of the 21st century's failings. In fact, the origin of the virus is never provided. Unlike *California*'s warning against climate change or *Alas, Babylon*'s warning against nuclear war, *Station Eleven* does not present an obvious critique of the time or impress an obvious warning upon its audience. Instead, the text's celebration of the 21st century serves to illuminate the positives, stressing the problems that would arise with the loss of modern advances. The first week the passengers were stranded in the airport, a teenage girl approaches Clark asking if he has any antidepressants, as her prescription is running low. Over the next few weeks, Clark observes the teenager's decline: "the girl who needed Effexor was very sick by then. Withdraw, she said. No one in the airport had the drug she needed" (Mandel 242). Days later, Clark notes that the girl disappeared into the woods, never to be found again (Mandel 245).

Although the stranded passengers developed new methods for collecting food, finding or creating a substitute for antidepressants with the limited airport resources is less likely. In his essay, “Memory and Historical Reconciliation,” Baccolini states that “by showing a regression of our present it also suggests that history may not be progressive” (Baccolini 115). In this way, a return to the past is not progressive, but a step back. If there is any message of warning to be derived from *Station Eleven*, it might be that western civilization’s advanced medicine and amenities should not be taken for granted; instead, steps should be taken to maintain the standard of living. Although this is certainly a plausible interpretation, *Station Eleven* does not seem as intentional or loaded with warning as texts are typically within the genre, making it a counter-narrative to most apocalyptic works. *Station Eleven’s* glorification of the 21st century sets it apart from other apocalyptic texts, but its construction of hope for a better world reinforces the relativity of utopia.

CHAPTER THREE

Dystopian Literature:

“Now I’m Awake”

Now I'm awake to the world. I was asleep before. That's how we let it happen. When they slaughtered Congress, we didn't wake up. When they blamed terrorists and suspended the Constitution, we didn't wake up then, either. Nothing changes instantaneously. In a gradually heating bathtub, you'd be boiled to death before you knew it. We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it....Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it.

- Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962)—perhaps the most influential piece of environmental writing—opens with a dystopian vision. The chapter, “A Fable for Tomorrow,” describes a beautiful town, robust with wildlife that erodes into a wasteland due to human behavior, stating, “No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves” (Carson 3). Carson forces the audience to recognize themselves as part of the problem. However, this powerful message is changed in the following stanza, as she reveals, “This town does not actually exist, but it might easily have a thousand counterparts in America or elsewhere in the world” (Carson 3). Carson's message—this is not our world, but it could be—is a pervasive message throughout dystopian literature. In Neil Gaiman's introduction

to *Fahrenheit 451*, he asserts, There are three phrases that make possible the world of writing about the world of not-yet” which include “What if . . . ?” “If only . . .” and “If this goes on . . .” (Gaiman xi). As he further explains:

‘If this goes on . . . ‘is the most predictive of the three, although it doesn’t try to predict an actual future with all its messy confusion. Instead, ‘If this goes on . . .’ fiction takes an element of life today, something clear and obvious and normally something troubling, and asks what would happen if this thing, that one thing, became bigger, became all-pervasive, changed the way we thought and behaved . . . It’s a cautionary question, and it lets us explore cautionary worlds. (Gaiman xii)

This rhetorical move forces audiences to consider consequences. In fact, the desolate future Carson describes motivated citizens to rally, culminating in the government’s decision to eliminate DDT. Although dystopian literature is portrayed as inherently pessimistic, the messages come from a place of hope for a better world.

In this way, dystopia has always been connected to problems of its time. After Hiroshima, fear of nuclear war manifested in an onslaught of aggressively bleak visions of the future. Pierre Boulle’s *Planet of the Apes* (1963), unveils the Statue of Liberty in ruins amidst a desert, formerly New York City. Nuclear war remains a prominent theme in dystopian literature; however, modern dilemmas have sparked a variety of alternative explanations for the apocalypse, often linked to environmental devastation. Similarly, *The Hunger Games* lists “encroaching seas” among the chain of events responsible for the corrupt civilization, Panem—a clear response to climate change (Collins 33). In “The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction,” Raffaella Baccolini articulates, “It is in the acceptance of responsibility and accountability, often worked through memory and the recovery of the past, that we bring the past into a living relation with the present

and may thus begin to lay the foundations for utopian change” (Baccolini 521). Regardless of the reason behind civilization’s collapse, dystopian novels seek to influence readers to disrupt society in order to avoid the dark futures portrayed, or in other words, construct a more utopian future. Although dystopian novels are based on a tradition of bleak outcomes, their messages are shockingly optimistic. Authors construct the problems of contemporary society as dystopian, incentivizing audiences to confront them in the real world.

Apocalyptic and dystopian literature are often mistaken as interchangeable. Whereas apocalyptic fiction shows the aftermath of society’s collapse and potential for its evolution, dystopian literature shows the product of that evolution. However, both narratives are usually consistent in their critique of modern society—only manifested differently. In contrast to the scattered residue of civilization normally presented in apocalyptic texts, dystopian literature presents a fully formed society, which characters usually seek to dismantle. Although there are always exceptions, such as *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the “the forward-backwardness of the genre” is less present in the dystopian genre (Smith 291). Probably, this is due to the nature of dystopian worlds as often occurring generations after the initial collapse of the previous society. With this structure, characters in these societies generally cannot remember the “before.” Furthermore, what little is often known about the previous society is often criticized and credited with behaviors leading to the current standard of living. Instead, characters look further back to inform their visions of utopia. As Smith articulates, “The destruction of the apocalypse, in certain incarnations of the genre, offers the promise of reconfiguration, of resetting and rebuilding a society unencumbered by the problems of the world that was destroyed” (Smith 291). Although dystopian works present bleak possibilities, they also provide avenues to work toward more utopian possibilities.

In classic dystopian novels such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949), characters fail to overcome the power of corrupt governments; in fact, no social progress occurs over the course of either famous genre-defining novel. However, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), represents a shift toward a more hopeful era of dystopian works. In the novel, the Republic of Gilead overthrows the United States. Under this new government, women are inferior citizens who are no longer allowed to work, no longer allowed to read, and no longer allowed to mother their own children. Instead, women are valued only for their ability to reproduce for the wealthy. In this not so distant future, fertility rates declined dramatically due to chemicals and over-pollution—a clear message that environmental decline is connected to human decline.

The Handmaid's Tale is different from most dystopian novels based on the speed with which the new government arises. Whereas most dystopian societies exist far into the future, Offred, the protagonist, remembers life before the new regime. However, I would not classify this story as apocalyptic due to the completeness of the government depicted. In contrast to apocalyptic works, people are not scattered, but functioning, even under poor conditions, within the new regime. Although Offred does not incite a rebellion, she repeatedly defies the regulations and limitations imposed on her such as writing, reading, and engaging in unsanctioned sexual activity. These repeated acts of defiance suggest the possibility for greater disruption of power and therefore provide hope for the future. In the end, Offred sees an opportunity to flee and takes it, writing, “Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light” (Atwood 296). This ambiguous end allows readers to determine Offred's outcome for themselves. Even without a large-scale rebellion, the ambiguity of Offred's story allows

audiences to hope. Like in *The Passage*, official documents are used to convey the outcome of characters and society. As Offred's story ends, a section entitled "Historical Notes," labeled as a "Partial transcript of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies" with a date: "2195" (Atwood 299). Although the documents neither confirm or deny Offred's fate, the possibility for her survival remains. By expanding the scope of the story beyond Offred, the documents provide audiences a glimpse into the future, suggesting The Republic of Gilead is no more. As the end of *The Handmaid's Tale* is open to interpretation, possibility for a better future remains.

In Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* citizens immerse themselves in the OASIS—"a virtual utopia" (Cline 33). Essentially, the OASIS is a videogame, but a highly complex one, available to all people with a working computer. Set in the year 2045, civilization is on the brink of collapse: "As the era of cheap, abundant energy drew to a close, poverty and unrest began to spread like a virus. Every day, more and more people had reason to seek solace inside Halliday and Morrow's virtual utopia" (Cline 59). After his death, James Halliday, one of the creators, embedded a competition within the OASIS in which the winner inherits his billions. Given "the ongoing energy crisis. Catastrophic climate change. Widespread famine, poverty, and disease. Half a dozen wars," competition is fierce as citizens see winning as the only hope for a better life (Cline 1). Having grown up in the 1980s, Halliday's video game serves as a cognitive map of his own life, riddled with the pop culture references from his youth. The premise of the competition is to solve different easter eggs, usually relating to Halliday's life. By shaping the OASIS as a reflection of the 1980s, Halliday allows players to indulge in a time before the problems escalated, providing an alluring escape or "oasis" from the harder to face difficulties of the present.

The protagonist, Wade Watts, is an overweight, friendless, and video game obsessed teenager. Living in a low income district with his abusive aunt, he prefers spending time in an

abandoned van logged down the street from his trailer logged into the OASIS. Even in childhood, the video game sheltered Wade from the pain of the present; in this vein, he looks to his childhood as a golden age before the true scale of the world's problems entered his consciousness:

The OASIS is the setting of all my happiest childhood memories. When my mom didn't have to work, we would log in at the same time and play games or go on interactive storybook adventures together. She used to have to force me to log out every night, because I never wanted to return to the real world. Because the real world sucked.

(Cline 18)

However, his mother's drug habit—a different mechanism for escape—eventually results in an overdose. As Wade explains, “She was depressed all the time, and taking drugs seemed to be the only thing she truly enjoyed. Of course, they were what eventually killed her” (Cline 18). The accidental nature of her death demonstrates the limitations of escapism along with its dangers. As Wade's confession that “[he] never wanted to return to the real world” indicates, he preferred time spent in the OASIS even before his mother's death. Rather than influencing him to consider the adverse outcomes of escapism, this tragedy motivated Wade to distance himself further from reality.

After his mother's death, the OASIS provided the only space in which Wade connected with other people. Abandoning school in the physical world, Wade enrolled in virtual classes with his best friend, Aech, whom he never met in person. These choices reflect an impulse to shield himself from the pain associated with the real world—pain not only imposed by society, but also derived from his personal life. Recalling the time shortly after his mother's death, Wade states:

My life wasn't so bad. At least that's what I kept telling myself, in a vain attempt to stave off the epic loneliness I now felt. Then the Hunt for Halliday's easter egg began. That was

what saved me, I think. Suddenly I found something worth doing. A dream worth chasing. For the last five years, the Hunt had given me a goal and a purpose. A quest to fulfill. A reason to get up in the morning. Something to look forward to. The moment I began searching for the egg, the future no longer seemed so bleak. (Cline 19)

For Wade, the OASIS provides not only a means to avoid troubles, but also an incentive to move forward. Still, the death of his mother lurks in the reader's mind, posing underlying questions. Although Wade constructs the OASIS as an inherently positive force, her death frames escapism as more complicated. In this vein, competing perspectives of the OASIS as both a negative and a positive force create friction. On the one hand, virtual immersion provides a distraction, even a relief from the overwhelming scale of contemporary issues; at the same time, however, the OASIS fosters an apathetic attitude toward these issues—it is simply easier and less painful to ignore them. As people spend more time in the OASIS, disinterest in human connections and community existing outside the virtual realm proliferates. As Wade emphasizes though, the hunt improved his conception of the future. Given the possibility of winning money, time devoted to the OASIS actually provides an opportunity to transform an individual's circumstances; comparably, people feel powerless to transform their circumstances in the physical world.

Although Wade understands the causes and effects associated with society's problems, he chooses not to dwell on them. In this way, Wade sees contemplating the world's problems, much less his limited potential in solving them, as painful and unproductive. As an orphan from a low-income neighborhood, he feels he lacks the financial, social, or political resources to create meaningful change. What's more, he also sees the decade in which he lives as a limitation—that it is too late for society. At the start of the story, Wade introduces the audience to the conditions

of 2045, expressing a wish that someone would have given him the following reality check earlier on in life to minimize the pain:

Basically, kid, what this all means is that life is a lot tougher than it used to be, in the Good Old Days, back before you were born. Things used to be awesome, but now they're kinda terrifying. To be honest, the future doesn't look too bright. You were born at a pretty crappy time in history. And it looks like things are only gonna get worse from here on out. Human civilization is in 'decline.' Some people even say it's 'collapsing.' (Cline 17)

Wade upholds times before, especially the 1980s as the "Good Old Days," but also recognizes the connection between the behaviors at work in these decades and the consequences that manifested themselves during his own time (Cline 17). Given this context, Wade's glorification of and obsession with the 1980s is ironic. This tension between the past and the present comes into play even within the OASIS. In search of an easter egg, Wade explores an OASIS world designed to mimic Halliday's neighborhood as it was in the 1980s. Upon entering the neighborhood, Wade thinks, "The houses all seemed incredibly big and were placed ridiculously far apart" and "every house on this street had been demolished in the late '90s to make room for a strip mall" (Cline 102). As Wade explores a reflection of the 1980s, Cline emphasizes the connection between the past and the present. Although this is an idealized time, Wade's 2045 sensibilities chip away at the rosy hue with which he ordinarily perceives this decade. "Ridiculously" shows that Wade recognizes the underlying truth that the unethical land use and consumerism of the past bare responsibility for the lower standard of living in the present.

In real life, Wade is unremarkable, but in the OASIS, he has a different persona as Parzival, an avatar designed to his choosing. Wade realizes—at least, on some level—an idealized version of himself with these tools, providing further distance from himself and reality. Identifying as a

“gunter,” a player who searches for Hadley’s eggs, Wade’s entire life is dedicated to winning the competition as a means to improve his own situation. However, the Innovative Online Industries (IOI), a “global communications conglomerate and the world’s largest internet server,” employ “sixers” to try and win the game on behalf of the cooperation (Cline 32). As Wade explains, “The moment the IOI took it over, the OASIS would cease to be the open-source virtual utopia I’d grown up in. It would become a corporate-run dystopia, an overpriced theme park for wealthy elitists” (Cline 33). Although Wade harbors a natural apathy against the IOI, he does not feel compelled to dedicate his life to dismantling their corporation. Instead, Wade explains his aspirations for winning are to escape the present world:

I’d have a nuclear-powered interstellar spacecraft constructed in Earth’s orbit, . . . I’d stock it with a lifetime supply of food and water, a self-sustaining biosphere, and a supercomputer loaded with every movie, book, song, videogame, and piece of artwork that human civilization has ever created, along with a stand-alone copy of the OASIS. Then I’d invite a few of my closest friends to come aboard, along with a team of doctors and scientists, and we’d all get the hell out of Dodge. Leave the solar system and start looking for an extrasolar Earthlike planet. (Cline 97)

This kind of isolation reflects the geographic utopias of the 16th century. Like those, however, Wade’s utopian vision does nothing to improve the condition of present society. Instead, it is rooted in escape and creation of a better place elsewhere, illustrating again that Wade’s acceptance of society as too far gone to salvage. In fantasizing about winning, he shows no grand ambitions to purpose the associated money or social utility to better society. Apart from his inclusion of “close friends,” Wade appears uninterested in the fate of the rest of the world.

After solving the first easter egg, Percival, Wade's OASIS alter ego, achieves a celebrity status. the first person to ever solve one of Halliday's puzzles, Wade is now privy to the most lucrative information in the world. As such, the IOI offers Wade financial incentive to share that information and join the "sixers" team. In doing so, Wade could ensure the security of his future, but thinks, "I couldn't sell out to the Sixers. If I did, and they did somehow manage to win the contest, I'd be the one responsible. There was no way I'd be able to live with that. I just hoped that Aech, Art3mis, and any other gunters they approached felt the same way" (Cline 141). This line of thinking is a turning point for Wade. As he considers his "responsibility" to the OASIS community, he shows an inclination toward the common good. To refuse the offer is risky—for one, he could still fail to solve the rest of the puzzle and lose any security for his future, but Wade refuses them anyway. In response, the IOI switches tactics, threatening to blow up Wade's trailer which he fails to take seriously. Since he refuses to share information, the IOI detonates their bomb, destroying Wade's trailer, all the surrounding trailers in the neighborhood, and killing his aunt. Unbeknownst to the IOI, Wade remains hidden in the abandoned van safe from harm's way. Immediately, he sends word to his friends to hide their identities. From this point on, the political becomes personal, incentivizing Wade to prioritize the good of the community over himself.

Throughout the novel, Wade provides the audience with few glimpses into the actual world. Technically, the first half of the novel takes place inside a parked van. The narrative is so tied up in the quest for easter eggs, that the audience experiences Wade's discomfort, the sense that the physical world is somehow less real than the OASIS. Rather than fully exploring the damage inflicted by the political sphere, the few insights into reality work to shock the reader, reminding them the OASIS is not the physical world of this text. This is further emphasized, as Wade and his avatar, Parzival, blur together. For instance, Wade states, "I reached up and tapped the stack of

textbooks on the locker's top shelf and they vanished. . ." (Cline 27). By using the active voice, "I touched," rather than "I made the avatar touch," Cline encourages the audience to forget that Wade and Parzival are not one in the same. Although this language leads the reader to visualize Wade interacting with the backpack, in reality, he only controls an avatar on his laptop. The text influences the audience to forget the OASIS is not the true world the novel is set in. As readers experience this deliberate confusion, they in turn understand the extent to which the OASIS is entrenched in the society.

Once Wade chooses to win the games, not just for himself, but for the greater good, he provides more insight into the real world and his identity expands outside the confines of his avatar. On a bus ride to Seattle, where he will meet his friends in person for the first time, Wade looks out the window and reflects on the state of the world:

The number of homeless people seemed to have increased drastically. Tents and cardboard shelters lined the streets, and the public parks I saw seemed to have been converted into refugee camps. As the transport rolled deeper into the city's skyscraper core, I saw people clustered on every street corner and in every vacant lot, huddled around burning barrels and portable fuel-cell heaters. Others waited in line at the free solar charging stations, wearing bulky, outdated visors and haptic gloves. Their hands made small, ghostly gestures as they interacted with the far more pleasant reality of the OASIS via one of GSS's free wireless access points. (Cline 276)

As Wade forces himself to look out at the world, the audience observes the tension between the virtual and physical worlds. By withholding a direct view into the greater community, the result is more impactful. After only understanding society in 2045 through Wade's reflections, rather than in the moment descriptions, this view provides a more direct insight and therefore an all-new

perspective. With the juxtaposition of refugee camps and the OASIS, the audience better understands the desire to escape the present society. As the real world and the virtual world are portrayed together, dystopia and utopia are portrayed together. With this connection, utopia is then constructed as a response to the conditions present in society. Audiences, as a result of this connection, better understand the obsession the population shares with the OASIS as not only a means for escape, but also hope for a better life. In contrast to the start of the story, winning the competition is no longer solely about improving his own circumstances, but also about preventing the IOI from harming the greater community.

In support of this ethic, Wade and his fellow gunter friends—Aech, Art3mis, and Dono—choose to team up. Before the explosion, the competition to find easter eggs strained their relationship, isolating the friends from one another. By choosing to work together as a team and prioritizing the good of the greater community over self gain, they defeat the IOI. Given that the characters are from different international backgrounds, this global cooperation provides a direct contrast to the mutually ensured destruction illustrated in *The Stand*. After winning the competition, Art3mis says to Wade:

We're going to use all of the moolah we just won to feed everyone on the planet. We're going to make the world a better place, right? . . . Don't you want to build a huge interstellar spaceship, load it full of videogames, junk food, and comfy couches, and then get the hell out of here? (Cline 371)

By winning the competition, Wade and his friends ensured their own security in addition to ensuring the OASIS remained free to the public. At the same time, their triumph does not raise the standard of living, restore limited resources, or solve the climate problem. However, their choice to work together, even if it meant dividing their earnings, shows the potential for cooperation in

upholding the common good. Given the characters' different international backgrounds, this also illustrates the potential for problem solving to take place not only within the local community, but the global one as well. What's more, the plan Art3mis describes emphasizes the shift from the start of the novel. Rather than abandoning Earth as Wade originally intended, he will invest his new resources in restoring the quality of life there, alongside his friends. In doing so, they might work toward a system in which hope is not dependent on a lottery win situation. Although a drastic change in social conditions is not realized by the end of the story, the potential is there and therefore hope for a better world as well.

Just as Wade finally forces himself to look out the window, the text emphasizes that even though it is painful to face reality, it is also the only way to create change. By setting the text in 2045, Cline forces contemporary audiences to recognize the contemporary society's potential role in creating a bleak future like the one depicted in *Ready Player One*. As Peter Fitting states in "Utopia, dystopia and science fiction":

Like the classics of the tradition, these recent works also invented societies which were grounded in the economic and political reorganization of society and which emphasized communitarian goals and ideals. But instead of describing at length the new society's institutions or laws, greater stress is given to decentralization and cooperation: for the most part, these recent works leave the political and economic structures in the background and concentrate on the lived reality of the characters. Whereas older utopias were usually plotted as a kind of guided tour of the new society, recent utopian writing has tried to involve the reader on a different level, by means of the thoughts and feelings of the characters in that new society who are involved in the daily struggle to build a world of human freedom and self-fulfilment" (147).

In the same vein, the evolution of Wade's character represents the potential for society to evolve as well. With the concluding line, "It occurred to me then that for the first time in as long as I could remember, I had absolutely no desire to log back into the OASIS," the audience can see his personal growth. (Cline 372). Throughout the entire narrative, the OASIS is constructed as superior to reality. Wade's preference to spend time in the real world over the virtual one signifies an important shift. In this vein, the "oasis" moves from a place outside the real world, to a place only on the horizon. However, just as Wade finds support in his friends, society might also find support in community. This representation of characters' development in tandem with society's development extends into other dystopian works as well.

In Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, The US government is long gone, and in its place is Panem. Like the thirteen colonies, Panem is made up of thirteen districts controlled by the Capitol. After a rebellion, known as The Dark Days, District 13 was destroyed. Ever since, an annual pageant known as The Hunger Games is enforced throughout the remaining twelve districts. As President Snow, leader of Panem, explains, "in punishment for the uprising, each of the twelve districts must provide one girl and one boy, known as tributes, to participate. . . Over a period of several weeks the competitors must fight to the death" (Collins, "The Hunger Games" 18). The Hunger Games, then, is a method of control over the districts. At the story's start, Katniss Everdeen, a girl from District 12's poorest neighborhood, volunteers to take the place of her sister. Throughout the trilogy, she becomes a symbol of rebellion against the corrupt government. As the thirteen districts reflect the original thirteen colonies, Panem, then, reflects the United States. In addition, the first book lists "encroaching seas" among the chain of events responsible for the corrupt civilization—a clear response to climate change (Collins, "The Hunger Games" 33). In

this way, *The Hunger Games* critiques contemporary society. Although *The Hunger Games* centers on a dark premise, the text still contains traces of utopian ideals.

Although conditions in District 12 are terrible, glimpses of utopia are present. Specifically, Katniss's ventures into the woods allow her to escape the impoverished conditions imposed by the capitol. Early on, she states, "the heat of the bread burned into my skin, but I clutched it tighter, clinging to life" (Collins, "The Hunger Games" 31). Consistently, food serves as an important theme, connecting to hope. In taking responsibility for hunting and gathering her own food, Katniss not only ensures her family's (immediate) survival, but also limits The Capitol's control. Coming from an impoverished district, Katniss is expected to view the lavish lifestyle in the Capitol as the ideal, but her response is more complicated:

What must it be like, I wonder, to live in a world where food appears at the press of a button? How would I spend the hours I now commit to combing the woods for sustenance if it were so easy to come by? What do they do all day, these people in the Capitol besides decorating their bodies and waiting around for a new shipment of tributes to roll in and die for their entertainment? (Collins, "The Hunger Games" 65)

As Katniss considers the influence growing up in the Capitol would have imposed on her identity, she suggests privilege results in diminished strength of character. However, she continues to grapple with the tension between the quality of life in the Capitol versus the lower quality of life in the districts.

In the second book, *Catching Fire*, Katniss is confronted with a similar difference in culture between District 12 and The Capitol. At a Capitol dinner party, she is initially awed, even overwhelmed by the impressive assortment of food, lamenting that she cannot try each dish. However, she soon discovers that dinner guests drink solutions to purge themselves to continue

eating. Again, Katniss's background in District 12 does not render her impressed by this level of indulgence. Instead, she is repulsed:

All I can think of is the emaciated bodies of children on our kitchen table as my mother prescribes what the parents can't give. More food. Now that we're rich, she'll send some home with them. But often in the old days, there was nothing to give and the child was past saving, anyway. And here in the Capitol they're vomiting for the pleasure of filling their bellies again and again. Not from some illness of body or mind, not from spoiled food. It's what everyone does at a party. Expected. Part of the fun (Collins, "Catching Fire" 52).

Katniss's memories of starving children juxtapose the lavish feast, highlighting the frivolity and excess of the Capitol. If anything, Katniss's experiences in District 12 do not incline her to celebrate the luxuries of the Capitol, but lead her instead to view the lavish lifestyle as deeply problematic. Rather than idolizing the Capitol and by extension modern civilization, the texts idealizes "a time before." Like in *The Stand*, no time is specified. Instead, the text romanticizes ages in which citizens were not as consumer driven and not as dependent on industrialized systems for food.

Throughout *The Hunger Games*, conflict is rooted in the contrasting visions of The Capitol as utopic and dystopic and the districts as utopic and dystopic. As Mark Fisher articulates in his article, "Precarious Dystopias":

When Katniss, the daughter of a dead miner who survives by hunting on the land, is conveyed to the Capitol by high-speed train, it is as if the nineteenth century is brought face to future-shocked face with twenty-first-century media culture, a disjunction that is pointed up by the garish appearance of the Capitol's citizens, with their grotesque

cosmetics, lurid hair dye, and ornate clothes. But the urban-modern-versus-rural-archaic opposition makes for the appearance of anomaly. (Fisher 30)

In the same vein, Katniss and Peeta are both wounded in the arena. Although Katniss is skilled at identifying plants, her herbal remedies do not live up to the Capitol's more advanced medication. Upon receiving burn medicine, she states, "This is no herbal concoction my mother grinds up out of woodland plants, it's high-tech medicine brewed up in the Capitol's labs" (Collins, *The Hunger Games* 188). Herbs cannot compete with The Capitol's advanced medicines, setting the Capitol up as superior to the districts. However, Katniss ultimately rejects life in the Capitol at the series' end, choosing instead, to return to District 12. Even though she can now afford to purchase food, she continues to hunt and gather. With her victor winnings, this way of life is no longer a necessity, but a choice. Thus, Katniss rejects the Capitol and by extension the contemporary US, instead embracing a lifestyle that honors the past.

At the same time the Games are portrayed as dystopic, they also provide hope for upward mobility. While more impoverished districts such as District 12, view the Games only as a terrifying lottery and method for control, wealthier districts volunteer with enthusiasm, seeing an opportunity to improve their circumstances. Winners of the games, known as Victors, are exempt from future lotteries, gain celebrity status, and incredible wealth. However, this security and promise of safety is destroyed in *Catching Fire*. Every twenty-five years, a Quarter Quell, a more extravagant and deadly Games, takes place. As it happens, the third Quarter Quell falls on the year following Katniss's victory. As President Snow proclaims, "as a reminder to the rebels that even the strongest among them cannot overcome the power of the Capitol, the male and female tributes will be repeated from the existing pool of victors" (Collins, "Catching Fire" 105). In doing so, this

exposes the fabrication of The Hunger Games' narrative, emphasizing The Capitol's deceit through their perpetuation of false hope. As Katniss thinks:

Yes, victors are our strongest. They're the ones who survived the arena and slipped the noose of poverty that strangles the rest of us. They, or should I say we, are the very embodiment of hope where there is no hope. And now twenty-three of us will be killed to show how even that hope was an illusion (Collins, "Catching Fire," 107).

Katniss, Peeta, and fellow Victors are forced to return to the arena. However, this ultimately backfires on the Capitol as several Victors, including Katniss, are rescued. In doing so, the rebels attack the Capitol's all powerful image, exposing weakness. As a result, the symbolic message President Snow intended backfires completely. Instead, the districts watching on television see that the Capitol can be "overcome" (Collins, "Catching Fire" 105).

Mockingjay, the final installment in the series, ends with a sense of ambiguity similar to *The Handmaid's Tale*. Although the corrupt political leaders are both assassinated, it is unclear what the future holds for citizens of Panem. In the aftermath of the war, one of the rebels tells Katniss, "Now we're in a sweet period where everyone agrees that our recent horrors should never be repeated. . . . But collective thinking is usually short lived. We're fickle, stupid beings with poor memories and a great gift for self-destruction. Although who knows? Maybe this will be it" (Collins, "Mockingjay" 379). In this way, Collins emphasizes the tension between utopia and dystopia, between idealism and reality. Even as she emphasizes humans' inclination toward destruction, she also suggests the possibility to learn from mistakes of the past. This potential for hope manifests itself in Katniss's attempt to create a new life after the war. Throughout the three novels, Katniss repeatedly asserts that she will never have children, stating, for instance:

I know I'll never marry, never risk bringing a child into the world. Because if there's one thing being a victor doesn't guarantee, it's your children's safety. My kids' names would go right into the reaping balls with everyone else's. And I swear I'll never let that happen (Collins, "The Hunger Games" 310).

Essentially, Katniss's choice not to have children is predicated on her fear for their safety in a dangerous world. Therefore, her decision to start a family with Peeta demonstrates that something in the society must have shifted for the better. Like in *Ready Player One*, Katniss's character development and change in perspective demonstrates not only hope for her character to live a better life, but hope for her society as well.

Like *Station Eleven*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* defies genre expectations. Set in the 1990s, this text reimagines the past instead of the future. At the core of the story is the relationship between three friends: Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy. Focalized through Kathy's perspective, she looks back on her childhood at Hailsham as an idealized, but confusing era due to the school's ambiguous nature. Based on Kathy's reveries of the past, audiences gather that something is different, even ominous about the school. For one, students reside year round, appear to not have families, and are treated oddly by visitors. As the novel unfolds, readers eventually gather that students are clones, expected to donate organs to the rest of society. As demonstrated in *The Hungers Games* and *Ready Player One*, rebellion, even on an individual scale, is intimately connected to dystopian literature. Ordinarily, characters within these societies confront antagonists and institutions in the hopes of improving present or else future conditions. However, this genre trope does not manifest itself in *Never Let Me Go*. Like *The Stand*, *Alas, Babylon*, and *Station Eleven*, the past is upheld as a golden age; however, dreams of a better era are confined to the past.

In the opening chapter, Kathy explains that she is employed as a carer—someone who tends to donors until their completion, or in other words, their death. At this point, the nature of donations and completions are not yet apparent to the audience, however. Kathy explains that at thirty-one years old, she has served as a carer for longer than generally allowed, which many attribute to her connection with Hailsham; this remark first alerts audiences to the fact that the school is abnormal, somehow special even. In the same vein, Kathy expresses the tension she feels between reflecting on and letting go of Hailsham. However, she “stop[s] resisting,” a choice she attributes to an encounter with a donor:

He'd just come through his third donation, it hadn't gone well, and he must have known he wasn't going to make it. He could hardly breathe, but he looked towards me and said: 'Hailsham. I bet that was a beautiful place.' Then the next morning, when I was making conversation to keep his mind off it all, and I asked where he'd grown up, he mentioned some place in Dorset and his face beneath the blotches went into a completely new kind of grimace. And I realised then how desperately he didn't want reminding. Instead, he wanted to hear about Hailsham. (Ishiguro 5)

With “a beautiful place,” Ishiguro connects Hailsham to an idyllic kind of paradise. Also, by juxtaposing Hailsham as a source of comfort and the rest of the world as a source of pain, Ishiguro furthers this connection. In this way, Hailsham reflects the isolated utopias of the 16th century as the school exists in tandem with the rest of society, which, based on the donor's negative reaction, is less idyllic. At the same time, the fact that the donor never experienced Hailsham firsthand, only through word of mouth, is also noteworthy. Hailsham takes on a mythical quality not only because the school is upheld among donors as a superior alternative to their real lives, but also because information is spread only through word of mouth. After observing the comfort Hailsham provides

the donor, Kathy, in turn, allows herself to indulge in reflections on the past which emphasizes that the past is superior to present.

Although Kathy experienced Hailsham firsthand, her understanding remains limited even in adulthood as the guardians, essentially teachers, diligently withheld information from students. For instance, the guardians emphasized the importance of creativity, encouraging students to submit their best artwork, ranging from paintings to poems, to Madame's gallery. From Kathy's early childhood and into her thirties, the gallery's true nature remains not only a mystery, but also a key piece in the puzzle that is Hailsham. In early childhood, the students submit their best pieces without hesitation, but eventually develop inquiries over the years. After conversation among the students, one girl finally speaks up about the issue. As Kathy describes, "I remember feeling furious at Polly for so stupidly breaking the unwritten rule, but at the same time, being terribly excited about what answer Miss Lucy might give" (Ishiguro 37). The other students share Kathy's divided feelings, emphasizing the tension between wanting to know the truth and their conditioning to not ask questions. What's more, "unwritten rule" constructs such confrontations as unusual, signifying that the ambiguity surrounding Hailsham and the gallery alike is deliberate. Miss Lucy says only, "All I can tell you today is that it's for a good reason. A very important reason. But if I tried to explain it to you now, I don't think you'd understand. One day, I hope, it'll be explained to you" (Ishiguro 37). Her reluctance to provide a thorough answer reinforces the underlying suspicion that guardians deliberately foster ambiguity as well as associating the gallery with the truth behind Hailsham.

The nature of Hailsham is deliberately ambiguous, reflecting the limited knowledge of its actual students. However, Miss Lucy eventually addresses the class on these ambiguities and for the first time, the text confirms what audiences only assumed thus far:

Your lives are set out for you. You'll become adults, then before you're old, before you're even middle-aged, you'll start to donate your vital organs. That's what each of you was created to do. You're not like the actors you watch on your videos, you're not even like me. You were brought into this world for a purpose, and your futures, all of them, have been decided . . . If you're to have decent lives, you have to know who you are and what lies ahead of you, every one of you. (Ishiguro 74).

With this information, the audience realizes the students understand, in some capacity, the reality of their situation. However, Kathy and Tommy seem confused about Miss Lucy's motivation in giving this lecture in addition to her serious tone. As Tommy speculates, "No, I don't think she meant that. What she was talking about was, you know, about us. What's going to happen to us one day. Donations and all that," Kathy responds, "But we *have* been taught about all that" . . . "I wonder what she meant. Does she think there are things we haven't been told yet?" (Ishiguro 26). The students' casual language such as "[a]nd all that," reveals their normalized interpretation of the donations. Rather than expressing fear, resentment, or even anger, the students appear complicit, accepting the donations as a fact of life. Whereas genre expectations lead readers to expect resistance or at least an escape attempt, Hailsham students are more preoccupied with romantic partners, artwork, and even gossip. This complacency signifies the school's role in conditioning students to accept donations as a fact of life as well as students' shallow understanding of their fate.

After graduating from Hailsham, Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth move into a house in the country—the first time they encounter clones from other backgrounds. Even outside Hailsham, the nature of the gallery remains central to the students' understanding of the world and themselves. Soon after their arrival, the three friends are approached by a couple from another school, asking

about a rumor—that students from Hailsham can receive “donations deferr[als] if they’re really in love (Ishiguro 159). With this information, comes the first hint of resistance from the clones. After learning about this rumor, Kathy and Tommy speculate about its authenticity as well as the selection process. As Tommy says to Kathy:

You see how difficult it could be to decide? Or a couple might really believe they’re in love, but it’s just a sex thing. Or just a crush. You see what I mean, Kath? It’ll be really hard to judge, and it’s probably impossible to get it right every time. But the point is, whoever decides, Madame or whoever it is, they need something to go on. (Ishiguro 161)

Tommy concludes that the gallery originated as a means to determine whether a couple really loved each other and deserved a deferral. Up until this point, the students appeared complacent, even unbothered by their fate. However, this feeble rumor presents, for the first time, the potential for an alternative, even a temporary one. With this potential, students’ acceptance of their donations is challenged, bringing to light their underlying resentment.

Although the friends separate in adulthood, they reunite as Kathy becomes Ruth’s carer. After Ruth’s completion, Tommy and Kathy fall in love and seek out Madame, hoping for a deferral. However, she provides dire news: “It was never true . . . even back when Hailsham was considered a shining beacon, an example of how we might move to a more humane and better way of doing things, even then, it wasn’t true. It’s best to be clear about this. A wishful rumour. That’s all it ever was” (Ishiguro 236). As she explains, the gallery was actually an attempt to humanize clones in order to improve the quality of their lives. However, Hailsham was a failed project. With this news, hope for not only Tommy and Kathy, but also the entire population of clones is destroyed.

In contrast to *The Hunger Games* and *Ready Player One*, characters in *Never Let Me Go* do not rebel in response to society's mistreatment of them. After Tommy completes, Kathy continues her position as a carer, accepting her impending fate as well. As Fisher articulates in an article responding to the film adaptation, "The peculiar horror of the film, in fact, resides in the unrelieved quality of its fatalism" (Fisher 31). For citizens on the receiving end, organ donation is not dystopic, but utopic as it allows for longer, healthier lives. In this way, the text's fatalism critiques the "common good" theme present in the genre. As a result of the clones' sacrifice, the greater population lives in a post-disease society. In this way, the text forces the audience to define "common." As a result, audiences are encouraged to consider underlying hierarchies in their own society, signifying that the "common good" should translate to everyone, not only privileged citizens. *Never Let Me Go* illustrates not only the potential for utopia and dystopia to coexist, but also emphasizes their interpretive nature. The novel is a counter narrative to the other dystopian texts due to the fatalism Fisher describes. Although characters imagine better conditions, these visions for a better reality are predicated only on myth and memories of an idealized past.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Value of Utopian Thinking:

Hope for a Better World

If you assume that there is no hope, you guarantee that there will be no hope. If you assume that there is an instinct for freedom, that there are opportunities to change things, then there is a possibility that you can contribute to making a better world.

- Noam Chomsky

Utopian, apocalyptic, and dystopian literature provide different interpretations of the future. However, each genre encourages readers to examine contemporary society in conjunction with the fictional one depicted. As Raffaella Baccolini writes in “The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction,” “Science fiction has the potential, through estrangement and cognitive mapping, to move its reader to see the difference of an elsewhere and thus think critically about the reader’s own world and possibly act on and change that world” (520). As discussed in previous chapters, apocalyptic and dystopian texts respond to problems of their time. In this vein, dark outcomes reflect the possibility for present generations to fail in addressing contemporary issues.

On the one hand, allusions to such failure could instill readers with the belief that there is no hope—that problems are too large or that society is too ill prepared to address them; in turn, this realization could foster apathy. In this vein, apocalyptic and dystopian literature have the potential to actually aggravate the problems they seek to address. However, this line of thinking works under the assumption that apocalyptic and dystopian works are inherently pessimistic. As the texts explored in previous chapters illustrate, hope is often a central component to these genres.

At the same time, the kind of critical thinking Baccolini describes is pivotal in shifting readers' response from apathy to motivation. By reflecting on the consequences of present society's actions or else the way a fictional society operates, audiences are forced to critically examine their society in a new light. As the organization of societies shift in these texts, readers observe that the institutions, values, and constructions of a given society are malleable; with this connection, readers recognize potential to create change. Although dystopian and apocalyptic works usually condemn present society, texts also encourage citizens to consider what is taken for granted, as demonstrated by *Station Eleven*. In this light, readers must consider what might be lost if action is not taken, what might be gained by making a change. In "Yesterday's Dream, Tomorrow's Necessity," Fontaine Maury Belford writes:

The discovery of the future is never disinterested; it is determined by how we understand the present and by how we use the past. Any projection of the future is purposeful. As we examine the various directions from which futurists see the future unfolding we realize that each of their prophecies achieves its power from a vision of what is in human life is not only to ensure but sustain us. And these visions, of a past that the present threatens in the future to condemn, are in the profoundest sense utopian. (Belford 229)

The emphasis these works place on the past and the future influence audiences to recognize the interconnectedness between the two—that the actions of today affect the world of tomorrow.

The messages present in apocalyptic and dystopian texts are often conveyed as warnings, but these designs are not inherently pessimistic. Even the bleakest storylines—nuclear disaster, climate change, debilitating viruses—stem from a desire to make change, a desire to preserve the integrity of the world. Although dystopia and utopia are often constructed as opposing entities, the truth is more complicated. These genres will always operate within grey areas as utopian and

dystopian thinking are deeply connected, always existing in tandem. At the heart of each genre is possibility: the possibility for a worse world and the possibility for a better one. With this common thread comes a civic responsibility toward the common good, as these texts emphasize. As Nicole Pohl writes in "Utopianism after More," "while utopia's form, function and content are historically variable, its defining characteristics remain constant: the desire to recognize, mobilize and transform" (Pohl 51). The greatest value in utopian, apocalyptic, and dystopian, literature is the opportunity afforded to readers to think critically about the world and work toward a better one.

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