

## DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE AND THE 'EXISTENTIAL VACUUM': AN ETHICAL CRITIQUE

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### **Abstract:**

The present paper delves into the profound relationship between dystopian literature and the concept 'existential vacuum', as elucidated by Victor Frankl, exploring how dystopian narratives reflect and critique societal values, norms, and ethical frameworks. By analysing key dystopian serves as a lens through which to examine ethical dilemmas and existential crises. By scrutinizing the exemplary (popular) novels in the genre of dystopian literature, the study aims to unravel the ethical underpinnings inherent in these narratives, delving into questions of human agency, moral responsibility, and societal structures, by shedding light on the ethical implications embedded in these fictional worlds while offering insight into how these narratives challenge readers to reflect on their own values and choices in the face of oppressive systems and existential crises. By engaging with the ethical critiques woven into dystopian literature, this research contributes to a nuanced understanding of how these narratives challenge conventional ethical paradigms and prompt reflection on contemporary ethical dilemmas and societal trajectories. The core concern of this research paper is to highlight the importance of reading dystopian literature by employing 'Ethical Criticism' as a lens, and the aim is to see whether indispensability of 'ethical coexistence' can be proven in the time when its sustainability appears to be in question.

### **Keywords:**

Existential Vacuum, Ethical Criticism, Dystopian Literature, Ethics of Coexistence, Literature Teaching

### **Introduction**

*Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.*

Dystopian literature has long served as a powerful medium for exploring the darker facets of human nature, societal structures, and ethical dilemmas. Within the realm of dystopian narratives, a recurring theme emerges—the 'existential vacuum'—a concept that encapsulates the profound sense of emptiness, purposelessness, and disconnection experienced by individuals in oppressive and dehumanizing societies. Conducting an ethical critique of how these narratives illuminate the ethical implications of societal decay, loss of individual agency, and moral ambiguity is no doubt essential for fostering a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics at play within contemporary society and for prompting meaningful dialogue towards addressing these pressing ethical concerns. Dystopian literature evokes the existential dread and moral quandaries faced by individuals in worlds governed by oppressive regimes and technological advancements. By critically examining the 'existential vacuum' within dystopian

narratives, the genre's role in fostering ethical awareness and prompting readers to contemplate their own roles in shaping a more just and humane future can be highlighted.

### **The History and Nature of ‘Dystopian Literature’**

The term 'dystopia' derives from 'utopia', introduced by Thomas More in 1516, critiquing societal flaws through an idealized fictional society embodying communist principles. 'Dystopia', coined by J.S. Mill, is commonly misunderstood as the direct antithesis of 'eutopia', implying a negative or 'bad' place. Dystopian fiction typically portrays nightmarish scenarios as reflections or critiques of existing societal norms, emphasizing a connection to reality rather than depicting wholly separate worlds. (Norledge 2-4) Early dystopias often depicted a negative condition caused by an excess of utopian zeal, challenging the assumption that all dystopias are anti-utopian (Claeys 284); some grew out of trends towards dictatorship, economic monopoly, and environmental collapse.

Dystopian fiction frequently depicts societies marked by oppression, suffering, or significant deterioration, serving as a warning against contemporary societal norms and tendencies. A resurgence of the genre occurred in the 1980s, termed the 'dystopian turn,' influenced by critical utopianism and prevailing socio-political circumstances. Canonical dystopian works such as *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have been extensively analysed for their portrayal of dystopian societies and their enduring impact on the genre.

Literary dystopias serve as reflections of the adverse effects of authoritarian regimes and the societal implications of technological advancement, drawing inspiration from the turbulent events of the 20th century, including World Wars and the emergence of totalitarian regimes. These narratives trace their origins to earlier anti-utopian literature, with thematic elements discernible in the works of authors such as Swift and Wells.

The shift from utopias to dystopias in the late 19th century signalled a move from idealized portrayals to cautionary tales about societal imperfections. The continued relevance of dystopian themes today implies parallels between fictional and real-world societies, notably evident in pervasive technological surveillance and control.

When examining recent scholarly contributions in the field of dystopian studies, from a comprehensive perspective, the following assumptions receive significant validation:

1. Centralised control is a hallmark of dystopian societies, where power is typically held by a totalitarian government, a technocratic elite, or a dictatorial figure, leading to the suppression of individual freedoms and autonomy.
2. Dystopian narratives often feature a backdrop of environmental degradation, technological control, or societal collapse, which contributes to the setting's bleakness and the character's sense of entrapment and despair.
3. Propaganda is used as a tool to manipulate and control the populace, with information, independent thought, and freedom of expression being restricted or altered to maintain the status quo of the ruling entity.
4. Social stratification is pronounced, with a clear division between the ruling class and the oppressed, often leading to a protagonist who questions or rebels against the established order, thus illustrating the dangers of a society that values conformity over diversity.
5. Despite the bleak outlook, dystopian novels serve as a warning and a platform for critique, reflecting contemporary societal fears and serving as a mirror to potential future outcomes if current trends are taken to their extremes.

### **The History and Nature of the Concept ‘Existential Vacuum’:**

*He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how.* (Frankl 9)