

# The Ones Who Read to the End

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## 1. Introduction

As part of the Dystopian Project's ongoing reconceptualization of the history of dystopian fictions so as to better see the dystopian fictions we have in our own twenty-first century, we are exploring dystopian endings.

This focus on endings allows us to do two complementary things. Firstly, we consider pleasure. Narrative theorists have long stressed the satisfactions of conclusions, of the ending of stories, for the reader. Pleasure is the mode of engagement most desired by novels (Hillis Miller 1978; Kermode 1978; Torgovnick 1981). For dystopian fictions, this pleasure has always been politically unstable. We note today the pervasiveness of dystopian tropes in commentary from both the left and the right, including the 'hard' versions of both. Whether "red-pilling" or "big brother," "news-speak," or a cruel or contrary (coerced or submitted to) "happiness," these tropes – as with the spread of the adjective "dystopian" itself – belong to no political home but are used across the spectrum. The political mobility of these tropes requires exploration and it is one of our wagers that endings – the formal end of the text, the survival or destruction of the dystopian regime required by that formal ending – are key to the political valences possible to dystopian fiction.

Secondly, we emphasise our interest in form, in the continuities and mutations of formal practices across the history of dystopian fiction. This is a theoretical commitment to understanding form as the place where historical meaning has its most potent resting place. Yet it is also a practical commitment insofar as we see our insistence on exploring form-giving patterns and changes as an intervention into contemporary scholarship on dystopia, in particular this is an intervention designed to critique the disintegration and loss of textual, including formal, specificity in some recent historical work on dystopia.

In this short presentation, I will focus what follows by using two short stories: the classic Ursula Le Guin story, “The Ones who walk away from Omelas,” (1973/75) and a more recent rejoinder to Le Guin, N.K. Jemisin’s “The Ones who Stay and Fight” (2018).

The aim here is to at least indicate the difficulty of dystopian endings, a formal difficulty and one which bears heavily on the model of the reader and the mode of interpretation imagined or demanded by the dystopian fiction. We have long learned to read these fictions as fictions of estrangement; they are politically interesting and even valuable because of the work they do in asking us to see again, to think again, about the ways we live, the world we live in. But estrangement is an antagonistic relationship for a narrative to set up and sustain; it is one therefore full of risks for the narrative. Will the reader accept the challenge involved in cognitive estrangement, an acceptance which could take the form of curiosity or of what Peter Fitting in 1991 called a “sense of wonder,” or the form of fear, a form of reading effect not without its own pleasures? (Fitting 1991: 91) Will the reader walk away from the chastisement implicit or explicit in the undoing of their everyday cognitive map? Or will they stay and read on?

## **2. The Reader who Refuses Utopia**

Jemisin’s story of the city of Um-Helat enacts a rebuke to Le Guin’s at the same time as it pays homage to it:

This is not Omelas, a tick of a city, fat and happy with its head buried in a tortured child. My accounting of Um-Helat is an homage, true, but there's nothing for you to fear, friend. (Jemisin 2018: 5)

Following carefully – with differences demarcated just as carefully – the structure and rhetorical style of “The Ones who Walk Away,” Jemisin’s narrator describes a festival day in the “City of Um-Helat,” the Day of Good Birds, a day of sunshine and beauty. You’ll remember that Le Guin opens her own story with a parallel description of the Festival of Summer, a day in the life of the city of Omelas:

[w]ith a clamor of bells that set the swallows soaring, the Festival of Summer came to the city Omelas, bright-towered by the sea. (Le Guin 1975: 1)

In the course of the description of the cities’ respective festival days, both narrators introduce a child in pain, pivoting the reader’s relationship to meaning on the unbearable suffering of a child. For Le Guin, the child’s suffering is the condition and price of Omelas itself. To mitigate or attempt to end its suffering would be to damage or to destroy the city: “[t]he terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child” (Le Guin 1975: 5).

Jemisin’s child does not support the city; its suffering is an abomination to be healed, to be helped. She is a little girl, “curly-haired, plump, blind, brown, tall for her age” (Jemisin 2018: 10). She has heard her father die at the hands of the city’s caretakers. The daughter does not understand and is wracked by “the injustice of it all” (Jemisin 2018: 10).

Le Guin’s ending involves those who walk away from the city which leans on such pain. Even though they know no ‘guilt,’ they cannot bear the ‘paradox’ and they leave. Jemisin’s ending insists on those who ‘stay and fight’. The final few lines of Jemisin’s story run as follows:

So don't walk away. The child needs you, too, don't you see? You also have to fight for her, now that you know she exists, or walking away is meaningless. Here, here is my hand. Take it. Please.

Good. Good.

Now. Let's get to work. (Jemisin 2018: 13)

At one level, we could take these different endings, the complex play of homage and critique at work here, as signals not only of different historical moments but also of different positions within those historical moments: the post-1968 pessimism or momentary cynicism of Le Guin contrasting with the militancy of Jemisin's writing, a militancy which is an articulation of the same militancy of Black Lives Matter. This world cannot be walked away from – it might not be lethal for all of us, but it is for some. It has to be fought.

At the narrative level, however, there is an odd continuity between the stories which speaks of a deeper historicity: the reader's position, and the two narrators' judgement of the reader as needing pain, as demanding it for "realism," for seriousness. Le Guin's story reserves its strongest rebuke for the reader who cannot bear utopia, who is incredulous in the face of joy. "[A]ll smiles have become archaic," she writes (Le Guin 1975: 1), a phenomenon which has nothing to do with any historical lack of smiles or desire for or capacity for smiling and everything to do with a sense that joy doesn't fit fiction, doesn't fit art:

The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting. This is the treason of the artist: a refusal to admit the banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain ... How can I tell you about the people of Omelas? (Le Guin 1975: 2)

It is this need for pain – the need the reader stands accused of – which introduces the child: the suffering child is not a creature of Omelas but of the economy of reading: credibility – which is needed if the story is to be read at all – requires pain:

Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing. (Le Guin 1975: 3)

The interrogative negative is the pathway to the child: the child is the "one more thing," the child's pain that which can found all else in this fictional world. They are introduced because the reader cannot 'believe' without that foundation of suffering.

Compare Jemisin's reuse or reiteration of this direct address to the reader – an address which chastises even as it fulfils the imagined reader's demand for what

here becomes “realism.” Having noted the “incredulity in your face!” when they speak of joy – “It cannot be, you say. Utopia? How banal” – the narrator tries “harder to describe it so that you might embrace it, too” (Jemisin 2018: 6). Enter the caretakers, the disciplinary apparatus of Um-Helat, and the child whose father is killed before her blind eyes:

Does this work for you, at last, friend? Does the possibility of harsh enforcement add enough realism? Are you better able to accept this postcolonial utopia now that you see its bloody teeth? (Jemisin 2018: 12)

### **3. The Reader in Dystopian Endings**

This arguable centrality of the reader to dystopian endings, the pointed or distilled centrality as dramatized in the polarising effect of Le Guin’s and Jemisin’s endings, allows us open up the question of the reader and of her desire, her motivation in reading to the end, in relation to dystopian form. And it allows us do so historically rather than positing a transhistorical reader; additionally it allows us not problematise but to see the problems which confront the dystopian narrative: how is it to imagine its reader?

Dystopian fiction from the moment it congealed into a recognisable genre or sub-genre of its own, out of the various threads of anti-utopia, satire, the novel of ideas and early SF, has thrived on conflict. From the narrative-counter-narrative dialectic identified by scholars of the classic dystopia (Baccolini and Moylan 2003), to the dispersed but no less potent conflicts of the critical dystopia (Moylan 2000a, 2000b), the narrative forms of dystopia are conflictual forms. Our question and our focus on endings is how these conflicts are “resolved” or if they even can be.

The reader has always been a central part of definitions of dystopia. Lyman Tower Sargent’s words can be taken here as indicative of an important tradition in the critical history of dystopian fiction, that which inhabits Utopian Studies. Sargent defines dystopia (or the negative utopia) as a “non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the

author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived" (Sargent 1994: 9)

This definition is productive as an ambitiously elastic way of conceptualising dystopia but the phrase 'considerably worse' cannot be allowed stand without further elaboration lest it do too much work in covering over or erasing the constitutive inequalities and the equally constitutive conflicts which have marked all 'societies' in which the reader has lived along the history of dystopia's own existence. The dystopia cannot presume but must create a space for its reader. For dystopian fiction, the public is a specific and formal problem – it is a necessity, a rhetorical necessity for the narrative's mode of address to exist at all, and it is that which the narrative wishes to rescue the reader from, to estrange the reader from so as to reposition the reader where she can gaze more critically at what she once was or thought.

In narrative terms, we can use Darko Suvin's key concept of the *novum* and ask both how it allows us to track the end of the dystopia – the end of the story but also any possible end of its dystopian world (whether narrated or just longed for) – and any antagonism with the reader which that ending leaves open (as with Le Guin or Jemisin) or resolves. The *novum*, as the world-building of any dystopia, must end. It is not itself narrative but it lives only in the narrative and will be cohered retrospectively by the narrative's own closure of itself. The ending of any dystopia is thus a risk for the operations of cognitive estrangement and for the rewards – sharply self-critical though these may be – of reading.

To conclude: this then is our project for a reading of dystopian endings. To build a close reading of the endings of a series of dystopian fictions across the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. And to do so using the concept of the *novum* and the epistemological work of cognitive estrangement which produces it. But to centre in that work the position of the reader, a position we will argue the dystopian texts' own formal work makes a historical one.

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