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Dystopian and Utopian Worlds from a Postmodern Eye

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Synopsis:

Postmodern writers tend to give a dystopian image only when a greater power takes control.

Conversely, to create a utopian world, writers are more likely to imagine a world free from the rules of the real world. In other words, this would be a world where there is no power and where authority figures are always absent. This paper shows the relationship between authority and dystopian worlds by analyzing the methods and the postmodern characteristics that writers used to create dystopian and utopian worlds in three postmodern works, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as well as Julio Cortázar's *The Southern Thruway* and *The Other Heaven* according to Linda Hutcheon in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*.

Abstract:

This quote is from the famous dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* “WAR IS PEACE/ FREEDOM IS SLAVERY/ IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH” (Orwell 6). This novel masterfully presents how authority figures program a people’s ideologies and how they play with people and create a different world with different laws. This strong quote represents the ideology of the society in the novel and shows how the power of the authority figures dominates the people’s minds. As Linda Hutcheon discusses in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* greater powers can manipulate the ideology of the people. Hutcheon introduces Coward and Ellis’s idea of ideological structures, saying, “Ideology both constructs and is constructed by the way in which we live our role in the social totality” (Hutcheon 178). This means the environment where the people live controls and creates the ideologies of the people. However, what is the environment, and who creates it? “We can begin to see the connections between ideology and existing relations of power” (Hutcheon 178) Power is the key to controlling the ideologies of the people; thus, the one who has the power, whether that is a person or a government, shapes the world. First, the work of George Orwell *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a dystopian novel published in 1949. In this novel Orwell is warning the society from the dangers of totalitarianism by imaging a dystopian world controlled by great power called Big Brother. Anyway, Language is the first characteristic that postmodern writers use to create the dystopian or utopian world. Hutcheon mentions that language is an important element of the Saussurean model, and yet, the scholars often neglected it (25). “language is a social contract: everything that is presented and thus received through language is already loaded with meaning inherent in the conceptual patterns of

the speaker's culture" (Hutcheon 25). Hutcheon discusses one of the elements of the semiotics theory and shows that it has a postmodern aspect, saying that "it is a typically postmodern and self-conscious challenge offered from *within* those very conventions and assumptions" (25).

George Orwell presents language as a weapon that authorities used for the sake of controlling and compelling people in order to gain their unconditional obedience. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell demonstrates this by showing the slogan of the dystopian world, "WAR IS PEACE/ FREEDOM IS SLAVERY/ IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH" (6). In her thesis *Hitting the Wall: Dystopian Metaphors of Ideology in Science Fiction*, Elsa Dominique Bouet discusses George Orwell's use of language in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "The slogan denotes the need to have an enemy, the need to obliterate freedom, to control and avoid independent thinking; that is to say to promote ignorance, blindness and submission to control and enforce loyalty and restriction through war." (101). Bouet implies that Orwell uses political language in the novel to show how authorities use language to control people's thinking. The government in the novel also invents a new language called "Newspeak" to control society, and by doing so, it can easily program and shape society. The novel proves that language is key because it influences knowledge, art, and history. In Orwell's essay *Politics and the English Language*, he discusses the fact that producers shape the language to adjust with their intentions: "Now, it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influences of this or that individual writer" (348). He adds, "The great enemy of clear language is insincerity" (Orwell 357). Orwell shows how playing with language can change the ideology of a society and explains how the insincerity of authority figures can be extremely dangerous. Orwell uses language to create a dystopian world, and the playfulness of his language is a postmodern element.

In “The Other Heaven” by Julio Cortázar, the author invents parallel utopian and dystopian worlds. The dystopian world is the real world where the narrator works as a stockbroker in Buenos Aires, lives with his mother, and is expected to be married soon. “It would occur to me that everything would let go, soften, give in, accepting without resistance that you can move like that from one thing to another” (Cortázar 128). The narrator describes his life as a series of boring responsibilities. However, the utopian world that Cortázar creates in this story is in Paris, where the narrator has an unexpected life full of adventures and an interesting girlfriend. “I keep repeating to myself that there would be time to return to my favorite neighborhood, forget about my work (I’m a stockbroker), and with a little luck find Josiane and stay with her till the next morning” (128). In the story, the narrator goes back and forth between the two worlds, yet he eventually settles down in his dystopian world. “I was born again into my better life, so far from Irma’s drawing room” (150). Postmodern works are usually unpredictable and contradictory. In her book *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon writes that “postmodernism is a phenomenon whose mode is resolutely contradictory as well as unavoidably political” (1). The method Cortázar uses in his story to create the dystopian and utopian worlds is fragmentation of space and reality. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon writes that postmodern works do not follow rules in time, space, or reality. “There are no natural hierarchies; there are only those we construct” (13). She adds that this allows critics to “challenge narratives that...presume to ‘master’ status, without necessarily assuming that status for itself” (13). Cortázar uses time and imagination to create dystopian and utopian worlds, and his delimitations of time allow for innovation. As Ihab Hassan writes in his article about postmodernism, “Standards are inevitable, and the best of these will create themselves to meet, to create, new occasions” (9). In “The Other Heaven,” the dystopian world is full of duties and

responsibilities, which can be considered to have power and authority over the narrator similar to power over society in Orwell's dystopian classic *Nineteen Eighty-Four*".

The third story by Cortázar is "The Southern Thruway," which is different from the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* where authority creates a dystopia. In Cortázar's story, the author shows a utopian world full of love and care. The story is about a group of people, including an engineer, stuck in a traffic jam that does not only lasts for hours, but for days and seasons. Cortázar again challenges reality and time by creating a timeless world. "Anyone could look at his watch, but it was as if that time strapped to your right wrist or the beep beep on the radio were measuring something else" (3). Time is meaningless in the Cortázar's utopia even though it has power over people in the real world. At the beginning of the story, the atmosphere is full of boredom and anxiety because of the characters' ignorance of the reason for the traffic jam. Like everyone else, the engineer waits for the police to come and solve the problem. "By the fourth time he had seen all that, done all that, the engineer decided not to leave his car again and to just wait for the police to somehow dissolve the bottleneck" (4). The engineer and the other people all wait for the authorities to solve the traffic jam, which reflects human tendency to wait for a greater power to take charge. "No one doubted that a serious accident had taken place in the area, which could be the only explanation for such an incredible delay. And with that, the government, taxes, road conditions, one topic after another..." (5). After a while, the people start to create their own society, choose their own leaders, and take charge instead of waiting for a greater power or authority. In this story, Cortázar totally ignores authority and the constructs of reality by abandoning the rules of the real world.

In "The Other Heaven" and "The Southern Thruway," Cortázar breaks the borders of time, space, and reality. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, however, Orwell illustrates language as a weapon

the authority uses to seize power over society. Regardless of the different methods these writers use to create dystopian and utopian worlds, both are focused on authority and the power. The dystopias in Orwell's *Nineteen Eight-Four* and Cortázar "The Other Heaven" are both attributed to authority as controller of people.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Big Brother watches society, and the government is the rule maker.

"Until they become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious" (Orwell 70). In the novel, the government controls language, emotions, and even sexual desires: "Desire was thoughtcrime" (68). Winston Smith, the protagonist, is freed from dystopian strongholds only when he breaks rules and rebels against totalitarian control, especially when he meets his lover Julia and they have sex, the enjoyment of which is illegal. Orwell shows that dystopia is invented by the government and utopia is in the hand of the people, which aligns with Hassan's claim that postmodern works are antiauthoritarian. Postmodern writers tend to focus on utopian eccentricities and place them front and center. As Hutcheon writes, they also question power and authority and that "to put these concepts into question is not to deny them" (57).

In "The Other Heaven," authority is represented by the duties of life that the narrator faces, such as work, family, and his fiancé. In the narrator's utopia, he is free from all of his duties and his relationship with Josiane is unclassified. Cortázar shows readers the utopian world of the narrator—one full of life, music, love, and art—and implies that the narrator is fully satisfied when he ignores his responsibilities, escapes his social persona, and acts freely. In "The Southern Thruway," Cortázar imagines a traffic jam away from any authority, and in "The Other Heaven," he creates a utopian world where authority is totally absent.

In conclusion, dystopia and utopia are conceded as common motifs in in postmodern literature, ranging from “fantasy utopia and grim dystopia [to] absurd slapstick comedy and tragedy” (Hutcheon 5). The works of both Cortázar and Orwell suggest that dystopia is caused by greater authoritative power and that the utopia is possible only when people reclaim power and create their own reality.

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