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Practice exam question

## Shortcuts to dystopia

**Luke McBratney**

Guidance for the question on p. 13 of the magazine.

### The opening of an answer

At first glance, it seems easy to disagree with the viewpoint, arguing for a more dominant reading: that writers of dystopian fiction, rather than warning about the present, warn about the future. Readers are horrified and fascinated by worlds such as Atwood's Gilead, its precursor, Oceania in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the unspecified setting of Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. And a big part of the gruesome attraction of such books is that readers, whether consciously or unconsciously, fear that their own society could become like those dystopian worlds if extremism — whether in the name of religion, socialism or technology — gained power. Despite this, there is also a case for the argument that dystopian fiction also warns about the evils of the present and perhaps does so at a more powerful, subliminal level.

This is the case for some dystopian texts more than others. For example, in *Fahrenheit 451*, it could be argued that, with its proliferation of television sets, burgeoning consumer culture and paranoid, febrile atmosphere (which surely reflects the McCarthy era through which Bradbury lived), it is of the real present — not some imagined future — that Bradbury warns. Yet other dystopian texts seem less anchored in the moment from which they came. For example, the horrors depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* spring from a range of times in the past. Indeed, Atwood's indebtedness to the past is clear in her very first words. The novel is dedicated 'FOR MARY WEBSTER AND PERRY MILLER'. Mary Webster was a seventeenth century historical figure: a woman hanged by a mob as a witch even though she'd been cleared of witchcraft in court, who then survived for a further fourteen years. Perry Miller was Atwood's teacher at Harvard, who taught her about America's Puritan settlers and their theocratic regime. With the novel's dedication in mind, it is easy to appreciate that Atwood seems not so much to warn about the present as warn about the future by looking at the past. Indeed, it's worth remembering that the most shocking events in *The Handmaid's Tale* are not fictitious happenings in the present or future, but real events from the past. As Atwood noted: 'When I wrote *The Handmaid's Tale*, nothing went into it that had not happened in real life somewhere at some time.'

By contrast, Bradbury's novel has less interest in the past than the present. America from the late 1940s to the 1950s had a deep fear of the influence of communism, which dominated all areas of life — from politics to culture and society at large. As in *Fahrenheit 451*, media censorship was used to combat what those in power felt was a threat. Perhaps the burning of the books in Bradbury's novel is a more direct and overt means of censorship and perhaps a symbol of a more covert ideology in which freedom of thought, questioning and the exploration of complex ideas and ways of viewing the world are being eroded. While books symbolise learning and free thinking in their many forms, the technological devices that are used by almost everyone — the wall-sized televisions, the 'shell' ear pieces, the massive advertising hoardings that obscure the natural world — symbolise the stifling and

controlling of thought by the government. Both Bradbury and Atwood make heavy use of irony to expound the ideas with which they disagree. For example, Captain Beatty lectures Montag at the climax of Part One:

we're the Happiness Boys, the Dixie Duo, you and I and the others. We stand against the small tide of those who want to make everyone unhappy with conflicting theory and thought.

While Bradbury's method is overt and his ideas intrude bluntly into the narrative, Atwood's irony is subtler. For example, an aunt does not deliver a lecture to the handmaids about blame and sexual assault, Atwood filters a memory of her teaching through the thoughts and feelings of Offred as she remembers how Aunt Helena orchestrated the handmaids in blaming Janine for the assault she suffered as a young woman. Unlike Captain Beatty who provides all the answers, Aunt Helena poses all the questions, nudging the handmaids to the answers she wants to hear:

But whose fault was it? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger.  
*Her fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in unison.*

By exploring the subtle ways in which an oppressive regime inculcates ideas, Atwood's dystopia draws on historical injustices and achieves more universality. The methods used have similarities to many regimes and seem to show that subjects of autocratic societies — whether religious or political — are vulnerable to a range of tactics to bring them to conformity. As such, the reader is perhaps drawn more into the world of the novelist, fearing that their world might become like it. By contrast, Bradbury's more polarised views between two characters — Montag/Beatty, pro-books/anti-books, pro-freedom of thought/anti-freedom of thought etc. — makes it easier for the reader to distance themselves from Bradbury's dystopian world. In this way, perhaps his fiction is more a warning about the future — and a future that might have seemed far-fetched in the 1950s when Bradbury's book was being first read. However, for readers in the 2020s this might not be the case. While book-burnings are uncommon, the technological advances that Bradbury frightened readers with in 1953 are very familiar to readers of the 2020s, with the popularity of in-ear devices, near wall-sized smart televisions and increasingly online lives. Perhaps that means that, in a way, Bradbury's book has moved from being a warning of the future to being a parable of the present.

## Commentary

- The opening paragraph acts as a condensed answer to the question and suggests the scope of the essay to come, introducing the argument in a lively, engaging way.
- The argument proceeds by means of comparison. For example, a link is made between Bradbury and Atwood's use of irony, which goes on to make a sophisticated comparison of both subject matter and methods.
- The dominant assessment objective is contexts (AO3) and the response places contexts at its heart, exploring, for example, Atwood's use of historical events and her study of history and commenting on the different ways in which readers from different times respond to the presentation of technology in *Fahrenheit 451*.

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