Nightmare on Main Street:  
An Analysis of the Urban Environment in Dystopian Fiction

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

The rise of the dystopian genre gave authors a new way to publicly critique societal problems. By exaggerating the current situation, authors are able to construct a world that exposes society's darkest fears. This characteristic of dystopian literature can be used as a tool to examine the problems with the physical structure of the city at the time the novels were written. *The Machine Stops* (1909), by E.M. Forster, exaggerates the pollution that British cities were experiencing at the height of the Industrial Revolution. Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* (1952) extrapolates the monotony created by post-WWII developments, and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) provides the readers with a look at a post-industrial city destroyed by ecological and biological disaster. Additionally, each novel demonstrates a tendency of dystopian literature to utilize the physical description of the city to emphasize the society's socioeconomic structure.

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I would like to thank Dr. Geralyn Strecker for reminding me about all of those tricky formatting skills that were necessary in completing this paper.
As a society, we do not like to imagine our darkest fears. Instead we prefer to envision perfection and the ideal. This human tendency is apparent when comparing utopian thought to dystopian discourse, as the former reveals a potential perfection, while the latter exposes problems, which are left available for judgment and criticism. The utopia makes us dream of a life in a perfect world, while the harsh and undesirable dystopian idea forces us to recognize our fear of it ever becoming reality. Each genre takes a different path, but both ultimately point humanity toward perfection. Utopians utilize hope while dystopians evoke fear, both strong human emotions reflecting desire. It is struggle and tension that cause us to ultimately distinguish our deepest desires from our temporary wants. This is what makes dystopian literature an effective tool for analysis of the current state of affairs, whether it is social, economic, or political. This thesis studies the description of urban areas in dystopian literature, seeking to reveal that the literary description of the city reveals the problems with urban forms and socioeconomic structure in cities at the time the novels were written.

Aspects of this study differ greatly from previously conducted research on utopian and dystopian thought. The most notable difference is the decision to examine dystopian fiction rather than utopian thought. Utopian literature often explores avenues for social progress, making it an appealing genre to study and analyze. However, the dystopian novel, utopia's counterpart, is often only seen as a variation on the same theme. This study sets out to reveal that through the exaggerated problems of an imagined dystopia, the collective fears and frustrations of a society can be easily realized and understood. In doing so, it will be demonstrated that, just as utopian literature can be used for social examination, dystopian fiction can also contribute to the advancement of social progress.
Another significant difference between the research included in this paper and previously conducted research is that this study looks specifically at the built environment and its effect on social interaction. Previous studies most often only research the social, political, and economic structures of fictional dystopian and utopian societies. This paper is an attempt to demonstrate that the dystopian novel has significant societal importance not only in the political and economic world, but also in understanding how the built environment is experienced by urban dwellers and the impact it has on society.

Urban planners are on a never-ending quest to achieve urban utopia. Unfortunately, time has often shown that past utopias eventually become future dystopias. The question is whether it is only in retrospect that these imperfections are realized or if it is possible that dystopian writers have been able to perceive these problems long before. This study sets out to prove the value of dystopian literature in physical and social analysis of the conditions of the city. Dystopian literature is often thought of only as an element of popular culture, but it can reveal the problems with the physical structure of cities in addition to their social environment.

In order to understand the dystopian genre, one must first grasp the complexities of the utopian genre, as it is in utopia that dystopia finds its roots. Through the discussion of societal change and progress, the field of utopian thought aspires to create a world free from conflict and despair. Utopian thought is the foundation of progress, describing an ideal and then striving to push the world in that direction. Society is in a constant struggle to achieve utopia, but it can never be reached, as its literal meaning of “no place,” suggests.

Sir Thomas More first used the term “utopia” to describe a perfect society in his 1516 novel, *Utopia*. The book was written in the form of a dialogue discussing the societal
implications of a perfected society inhabiting the island of Utopia. More selected the term utopia based on the Greek word meaning "no place." He made a conscious decision to use the term, "utopia," rather than its relative, "eutopia," which means "good place." Choosing "utopia" enhanced his satirical commentary, and made explicit his doubts about a society like Utopia ever existing, while still leaving the reader to judge whether the utopia was inherently good or bad. In doing so, he creates tonal ambiguity, allowing the reader to draw conclusions about the successes and failures of the society.

Dystopia, the opposite of eutopia, did not come into existence until the mid-16th-century. Recent research has revealed that an anonymous author, suspected to be Lewis Henry Younge, first coined the term in a 1747 poem titled Utopia, or Apollo’s Golden Age. In the first publication of the poem, Younge incorrectly transcribed the word as “dustopia,” but by 1748 when it was published in The Gentleman’s Magazine, the etymological error had been corrected to read “dystopia,” making it the first transcribed use of the word. Most interesting was that in the Gentleman’s Magazine edition of the poem, Younge included footnotes that explicitly defined utopia as “a happy or blessed country,” and dystopia as “an unhappy country” (Budakov, 2010, pp. 86-87). While not identical matches, these footnoted definitions demonstrate that these early 16th century definitions of the words were similar to the widely accepted 21st century definitions.

However, prior to discovering Younge’s use of the word “dystopia,” it was believed that John Stuart Mill coined the term in 1868, while delivering a speech in the British House of Commons. He spoke the following:

It is, perhaps, too complimentary to call them Utopians, they ought rather to be called dys-topians, or caco-topians. What is commonly called Utopian is something
too good to be practicable; but what they appear to favour is too bad to be practicable. (“dystopia, n.”, 2011).

In this speech, Mill used the term “dystopia,” and alluded to “cacotopia”, a term coined by Jeremy Bentham in his Plan of Parliamentary Reform, in the Form of a Catechism. Both terms are derived from the same root, -topia, meaning place, but Caco- is the Greek prefix for evil. Despite the dark nature of the definition, the term is rarely used to describe a place of bad character. Most importantly, Mill used the term dystopia, which uses the prefix dys-, meaning “destroying the good sense of the word, or increase its bad sense,” creating the modern understanding of the word (“dystopia, n.”, 2011).

The utopian genre was most prolific in the 18th century, but as new technology for industrial practices developed at the end of the century, utopian literature gave way to the new and more “hypochondriacal,” genre of dystopian fiction. As “ecological, social, political, economic, and culture time-bombs” began to consume the fears of the urban population, this relatively new genre exploded by capitalizing on the fears of the people (Baeten, 2002a, p. 104). This marked a shift from optimistic utopian fiction to primarily pessimistic dystopian fiction.

In order to achieve the goals of the new dystopian genre, the traditional utopian format had to be altered. Traditionally, the utopian genre told the tale of an outside traveler voyaging to utopia. Initially filled with skepticism for this foreign culture, the voyager eventually realizes the ideal nature of the community. However, the negative nature of the dystopian genre forces it to approach commentary from a different point of view; thus, bringing the dystopian format to life.
Dystopian literature often follows a protagonist who has blindly accepted their native society and culture. Acceptance eventually gives way to doubt, as the protagonist undergoes a transformation that creates new feelings of non-conformity. Martin Schäfer describes this by stating, “simultaneously the narrative changes from static description to dynamic, conflict-ridden novel” (1979, p. 287). As a result, the dystopian genre finds its roots in fear and discord.

Throughout the course of the 21st century, the dystopian genre has described the fears of urban dwellers. These fears were only strengthened as the threats of communism, world war, economic disparity, and widespread holocaust loomed over the nation (Baeten, 2002b, p. 143). The dystopia has become a genre that captivates its audience with the horrors of what could happen if situations are allowed to continue, inspiring discussion about the future of society.

This paper will feature dystopian fiction from three distinctly different epochs in urban history: industrialization, post-WWII suburbanization, and post-industrialism. These three periods were marked by dramatic changes in the form and planning of cities. The dystopian literature from these periods gives us a window into the urban issues of the time. *The Machine Stops* (1909), a dystopian short story by E.M. Forster was selected to represent the industrial period. Written at the height of industrialization, its themes of industrial waste and mechanism are reflective of the controversial economic practices of the time. Kurt Vonnegut’s first novel, *Player Piano* (1952), was selected to represent post-WWII suburbanization. It was selected over some more well-known dystopias written at the same time, such as George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-four* and Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, because of its focus on place and the description of the built environment. Finally, a
more contemporary piece was selected to conclude the study. Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003) represents the post-industrial period through a theme of environmental conflict and a description of how it affects the contemporary city.

This thesis will thoroughly discuss each of these dystopian pieces, first familiarizing the reader with the author, plot, and setting of each novel. Each novel or story description will be followed by a comparison of the dystopian setting to the urban environment at the time the piece was written. Thus, *The Machine Stops* will be compared to early 20th century British cities, *Player Piano* to the post-WWII American suburb, and *Oryx and Crake* to the contemporary post-industrial city. Following a discussion of each individual piece the thesis will conclude with a synthesis of the discrepancies and common themes found in all three examples of dystopian fiction when taken as a whole.
The Machine Stops (1909)

E.M. Forster

1879 – June 7, 1970

Edward Morgan Forster, the author of The Machine Stops, was born in 1879 in London, England. Shortly after birth, his father was killed by an unexpected case of tuberculosis, forcing E.M. Forster and his mother to relocate with his maternal family. They moved to the countryside of Hertfordshire in 1880, where Forster lived until attending the University of Cambridge. Upon graduating in 1901, Forster traveled around Europe for the next 14 years. He lived in Greece and then Italy, until 1907. Shortly after, Forster wrote the The Machine Stops in 1909. In 1912, he made his famed trip to India that inspired his most famous novel, A Passage to India (E.M. Forster, 2011).

The Machine Stops (1909) is a short story by E. M. Forster that tells the tale of a mother and son separated by distance and divergent beliefs, as they explore their opinions of the Machine during its final years of operation. The mother conservatively holds tight to the belief that the Machine, which is responsible for all of the happenings in this fictional society, is necessary for survival. Throughout the story, she is challenged by her radical son who fears the end of the Machine and searches for refuge on the surface of the earth.

The Machine Stops describes a world where the surface of the earth is no longer habitable. Consequently, almost all human life and interaction takes place under the surface of the earth. The story cites the “litter age” and “literature epoch” as causes for the destitute condition of the earth’s surface from the excess waste of these periods (Forster, 1909, p. 7). Underneath the earth’s landmasses lie stacks of individual rooms, each occupied by one person and regulated by “the Machine.”
The Machine controls everything needed for life underground, including airflow, music, communication, and light. Each room is filled with buttons, used to summon various needs and luxuries of daily living. The underground is always flooded by light, and is only interrupted when darkness is summoned by the press of a button. Citizens are also able to call for music, trains, and even electronic communication with other people by simply pressing buttons.

The layers of living units are interrupted only by subway systems that existed before the community was built. The live rails and winding tunnels of the system are referenced throughout the short story. The system continues to be used for transportation, but due to advanced technology, the need is rare. However, when a citizen does wish to travel, the trains can travel through the underground living areas, transporting the rider to other rooms and vomitories.

Vomitories are the only openings that lead to the surface of the earth. Upon exiting through a vomitory, citizens must use a respirator because it is said that the polluted air will cause death. The surface of the earth has no signs of life and is described as a “horrible brown,” with “only dust and mud” (Forster, 1909, p. 5). Thus, few people see any need to travel to the surface of the earth, as they find it uninspiring, and therefore undesirable.

Surface travel is only conducted when it is necessary to travel to the other side of the earth, as this cannot be done underground due to large bodies of water. When on the surface of the earth, air-ships and terrestrial motors are used for travel. These are the names given to airplanes and motor vehicles respectively. Nevertheless, citizens find little need for travel on the surface of the earth because, as Forster states, “thanks to the advance of science, the earth was exactly alike all over” (Forster, 1909, p. 12). Additionally, face-to-
face communication can be simulated electronically, creating little need for travel. Most citizens find little need to ever leave their rooms, and typically stay within the confines of their individual chambers, thinking up ideas and attending lectures electronically. Because all places look the same, Forster points out, “Why return to Shrewsbury when it would all be like Peking?” (Forster, 1909, p. 12).

Additionally, all citizens are given the same rights and privileges, which are only threatened by the punishment of homelessness. Population is scientifically controlled in order to eliminate unnecessary homelessness, meaning that a birth is only allowed after there has been a death. Thus, homelessness is only brought about by death or dishonorable behavior.

Finally, the only communal activity that takes place in the world of The Machine is early childhood schooling. Children are taught in public nurseries until they reach a suitable age for room assignment. All other forms of public gathering have been abolished, as they are thought to be “clumsy” and unnecessary (Forster, 1909, p. 7).

**Forster’s The Machine Stops and the Industrial City**

Forster drew his inspiration from facets of the English society in which he was raised and lived. Written in 1909, *The Machine Stops* primarily focuses on the effect that mechanism had on daily life, creating a world where machinery and automation have made struggle virtually obsolete. However, the story also has an underlying theme of industrialism’s effect on the physical environment of the city.

During the industrial epoch, capitalism was the law of the land. Nearly all decisions made by the government were based on the free market, including those relating to city
planning. Therefore, there was little formal planning and little regulation of industrial placement and practice. Most industrial facilities made decisions about location based on market trends and proximity to transportation routes. It was not uncommon for residential units to be located near large noxious factories, especially once industries began providing living units for laborers. Additionally, industry was not limited to factory facilities. Mining was a rising industry during the late 19th century, contributing to the pervasive pollution that affected the city. Nearby residents suffered the effects of pollution, noise, and vibrations from disruptive heavy industry (Mumford, 1961, p. 460).

Furthermore, railroads were expanding at an unprecedented rate. In the United States, passenger and freight rail systems were stretching across the country (Mumford, 1961, p. 460). Almost simultaneously, London was making innovative strides in rail travel when it opened the world's first underground rail system in 1863. The system was built using a "cut and cover," method, cutting into the ground from the street to dig the tunnel. The hole was then closed back up, leaving behind a brick tunnel for the rail system (Transport for London, 2011).

Though these systems were helping the world progress and become more interconnected, early steam powered vehicles only worsened air quality in the areas surrounding the tracks. In London this meant in the enclosed underground spaces. This only perpetuated London's on-going pollution problem and was regarded by passengers as a "mild form of torture." The system experimented with many innovative fueling methods in efforts to reduce the effects of steam power on the passengers, at one point even attempting to power trains by heated bricks, but none saw any success. The pollution
problems that steam created ended when the underground train cars were electrified in 1905 (London Transport Museum, 2011).

Many elements of the underground system are referenced in *The Machine Stops*. Forster’s fictitious world exists within the cavities of London’s underground rail system. The citizens use the underground train for travel. Forster also uses the term “vomitorie” to describe the stairways that lead to the surface of the earth. The vomitories may allude to the early station openings, which transported people from street-level down to the underground system, and vise versa. It is also apparent that the story was written post-electrification of the train cars; Forster makes allusions to the “live rail” and the threat of electrocution that it poses to those trespassing on the system (Forster, 1909, p. 23). Lastly, a ventilation shaft, located within one of the system tunnels, is described in *The Machine Stops*. The antagonist eventually discovers that it leads to the surface of the earth and functions as a secret passage out of the underground. Ventilation shafts, like the one described in *The Machine Stops*, were used in the tunnels to release the toxic smoke generated by the steam trains. Ventilation shafts similar to those described in the story can be observed in the section of the pneumatic railway featured in figure 1.

Figure 1: A section of the Pneumatic Despatch Railway under a London street. (Untitled, 200, p. 287)
Additionally, throughout the end of the 19th century, city centers were becoming overcrowded, and living conditions were declining. The rise of wealth and commerce in the city had caused a surge in population, forcing many people to live in substandard housing and squalid slums. The countryside was not doing any better. The increased availability of jobs in the city and the decline of the local agriculture market had caused people to move away from the country to be closer to the available jobs in the city. Ebenezer Howard used these conditions as the rationale for creating the Garden City, which would provide the social and economic benefits of living in the city, without the poor living conditions and overpopulation (Howard, 1965, pp. 42-46).

*The Machine Stops* was written shortly after the opening of Ebenezer Howard's first Garden City, Letchworth, in Hertfordshire, England, the same region that Forster moved to as a child. The Garden City Movement took place at the end of the 19th century and strove to combine the social benefits of the city with the aesthetic benefits of the country to create a desirable town-country hybrid. In *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*, Howard describes the "three magnets," which are town, country, and town-country. Figure 2 shows the three magnets as described by Howard. He analyzes the characteristics of each to show that the town-country combines the best characteristics of each, creating the most
desirable place to live (Howard, 1965, pp. 46-48). Table 1 breaks these characteristics down further to show only those that relate directly to the condition of the built environment. Physical characteristics of the town are largely negative, while those of the country are primarily positive. Thus, from a purely physical perspective, the landscape of the town-country, or Garden City, combines the ideal physical living situation of the country, with many of the social characteristics of the city.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Town</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Town-Country</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Closing out of nature</td>
<td>Beauty of Nature</td>
<td>Beauty of Nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Places of amusement</td>
<td>Wood</td>
<td>Fields and Parks of Easy Access</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fogs</td>
<td>Meadow</td>
<td>Pure Air and Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Droughts</td>
<td>Forest</td>
<td>Good Drainage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foul Air</td>
<td>Fresh Air</td>
<td>No Smoke</td>
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<tr>
<td>Murky Sky</td>
<td>Lack of Drainage</td>
<td>No Slums</td>
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<tr>
<td>Well-Lit Streets</td>
<td>Abundance of Water</td>
<td>Bright Homes and Gardens</td>
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<tr>
<td>Slums &amp; Gin Palaces</td>
<td>Crowded Dwellings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Palatial Edifices</td>
<td>Deserted Villages</td>
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Table 1: Physical Elements of Howard’s Three Magnets

In *The Machine Stops*, Forster describes a future where the surface of the earth is uninhabitable. The short story repeatedly refers to the lack of life on the earth’s surface, describing it as nothing but “dust and mud” (Forster, 1909, p. 5). Those who wish to visit the surface of the earth, which are few and far between, must wear a respirator just to breathe the polluted air. This description of conditions that are unsuitable for life seems to be directly drawn from the horrors of what was happening to the earth at the time.

Furthermore, at the end of the 19th century, population was rapidly increasing around the world, and more specifically within cities. At the time, cities were not built to accommodate large influxes in population, leaving many poorer residents displaced and without adequate housing options. Poor workers were forced into group lodging facilities
or worker communities, often sharing a crowded space with many other people. The accommodations within these facilities did not typically offer natural light or proper ventilation (Mumford, 1961, pp. 461-463).

_The Machine Stops_ reacts to these undesirable conditions, creating a seemingly utopian world where a personal bed can be summoned at the click of a button and each citizen is entitled to his or her own private room. This underground world that Forster imagined finds a way to control population growth, making it possible for “the machine” to ensure every citizen the right to a private room. Births and deaths are closely monitored, so that there are no births without corresponding deaths. A death means an empty room, which provides space for another inhabitant to occupy.

The rooms given to each citizen are flooded with artificial light. Throughout the story, Forster makes references to the artificial light that reaches every corner of the underground world. The only time that citizens do not experience light is when they go to sleep and request for the lights to be turned off. Additionally, ventilation systems pump artificial air into the rooms and throughout the underground city. It is only with this ventilation system that the population is able to survive, and it is the failure of the system that leads to the population’s devastating end. These modern conveniences, when juxtaposed with the actual conditions of early 20th century England, give us a window into the desires of the 20th century English citizens. It is Forster who extrapolates the conditions to demonstrate that these imagined conveniences could, in turn, create more societal problems.
Player Piano (1952)

Kurt Vonnegut

November 11, 1922 – April 11, 2007

Kurt Vonnegut was born in 1922 and was raised in Indianapolis, Indiana until attending Cornell University. After the Great Depression, Vonnegut’s wealthy family was forced to cut back on some expenses, forcing Kurt Vonnegut to begin attending public school in Indianapolis. He argues that this experience was “invaluable” in shaping his adult character (Kurt Vonnegut, Jr, 2000).

In 1943, when the United States instituted the draft for World War II, Vonnegut was able to evade being shipped overseas by enlisting in the United States Army Advanced Specialist Training Program, where he studied mechanical engineering. This program was disbanded the next year, sending Vonnegut overseas for combat. That year, Vonnegut was captured by the Germans and detained as a prisoner of war in Dresden. He was one of the few who survived the United States’ attack on Dresden, which heavily influenced his later writing, most notably Slaughter-House Five (Kurt Vonnegut, Jr, 2000).

Upon returning, Vonnegut began graduate studies at the University of Chicago, but left without a degree and began working as a publicist for a General Electric research laboratory in Schenectady, New York (Kurt Vonnegut, Jr, 2000). This later became the setting for Player Piano, Vonnegut’s first novel, which provides dystopic commentary on the negative effects of mechanism on society (Kurt Vonnegut, Jr, 2001).

Player Piano was Kurt Vonnegut’s first novel. It tells the story of a fictitious city in post-World War II United States that has achieved perfect automation. The novel is set in Illium, New York, a highly polarized city based on Schenectady, New York. The geography
of Illium is reflective of Schenectady, including the Iroquois river that divides the north from the south, referring directly to Schenectady's Mohawk River. The novel follows Paul Proteus, the lead engineer for Illium Works, the company that houses many of the machines in Illium that keep the town functioning properly.

In this society, intellect determines social class, which is displayed to the citizens through a ranked identification number. Those who do not have the intelligence to acquire a job as an engineer or manager, the most prestigious occupations, are forced to accept positions with the military or the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps, also known as the Reeks and Wrecks.

As his name suggests, Proteus undergoes a transformation that leads him to question many elements of society that he had previously accepted with closed eyes. In addition to Paul Proteus, Player Piano follows several upper-class citizens and a religious leader visiting from a fictitious country, providing a wide variety of opinions and commentary on the society. The novel is named after an automated, coin-operated player piano in a local bar, focusing heavily on the effects of automation on improving and hindering productivity and living standards in Illium. Player Piano concludes in a state of riot and chaos, and the reader is left with the knowledge that the end of the society is near.

Illium, New York suffers from extreme socioeconomic polarization. The Iroquois River runs through the center of the city, creating a barrier that divides the city physically, aiding in the social divide. The engineers, managers, and their machines occupy the northern side of the river, while the rest of the population lives south of the river. Housing units for engineers and managers are located to the northwest, while machines occupy the northeast. The area south of the river is known commonly as Homestead. Homestead is
where everyone else in the city resides. All of their living and entertainment needs are satisfied by the facilities located in Homestead, providing little reason to travel north of the river and perpetuating the city’s socioeconomic polarization through the illusion of two completely separate worlds.

Those who live in Homestead are either members of the Military or the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps. More commonly referred to as the “Reeks and Wrecks”, the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps is the city’s primary construction and maintenance crew. The corps is often depicted repairing roads and bridges around the city. With the introduction of the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps, the city saw the elimination of many infrastructure problems in the city, which was likely the result of an unprecedented number of workers available to make repairs. The only time Vonnegut mentions the Reeks and Wrecks is when the corps is featured filling a road “chuckhole,” with no fewer than thirty other corps members offering help from the sidelines. Additional public utilities and infrastructure systems are only described in reference to Homestead. The “gurgling” storm sewers and flowing hydrants are some of the features used to describe Homestead, aiding the characterization of a decaying neighborhood (Vonnegut, 1952, p. 267).

Farmland is almost nonexistent and open space is uncommon in Illium. What little farmland does exist is thought to be useless and an unfortunate waste of space. Open space and natural space is typically described in reference to a place of retreat and respite. One such example is Illium Works’s annual weeklong company retreat in a forested area known as “the Meadows.” The Meadows are used for team building and training, and nothing more. Additionally, Paul, the protagonist, dreams of distant woodlands and farmlands, to
which he and his wife can retreat as a way of avoiding the complications and stressors of Illium.

Housing units for all citizens of Illium are described in a way that suggests homes with similar features and color palettes. At one point, Vonnegut explicitly describes this through a suburban Chicago development, calling it “a post-war development of three thousand dream houses for three thousand families with presumably identical dreams” (Vonnegut, 1952, p. 160). Though the façade of homes north of the river are never explicitly described, housing units in Homestead are always described as a stark gray. The only color described in Homestead is the neon, electromagnetic tubes carrying currents from the north.

Negative impressions of Homestead run rampant in the land north of the Iroquois occupied by the engineers and managers. Described at times as, “underworld” and “common” people, the low IQs of Homestead residents, which are indicative of those earning a fixed income from the military or Reeks and Wrecks, have contributed to an illogical fear of those in a lower socioeconomic bracket.

This division between intellectual and commoner creates the primary conflict of the novel, of which the protagonist, Paul grapples with. The turning point of Player Piano comes when sitting in a bar, Paul concludes:

It was a generalized love – particularly for the little people, the common people, God bless them. All his life they had been hidden from him by the walls of his ivory tower. Now, this night, he had come among them, shared their hopes and disappointments, understood their yearnings, discovered the beauty of their simplicities and their earthy values. This was real, this side of the river, and Paul
loved these common people, and wanted to help, and let them know they were loved and understood, and he wanted them to love him too. (Vonnegut, 1952, p. 102)

Paul's perception and understanding of Homestead differs greatly from the other engineers and managers in Illium. This social and physical divide is one of the primary conflicts of *Player Piano*.

**Vonnegut's Player Piano and the Post-WWII City**

The single-family homes and winding developments described in Illium are characteristic of post-World War II developments in the United States. At the end of the Second World War, America was faced with an unexpected problem. The housing market was unable to accommodate the large influx of people returning to the country from war. New single-family homes were being made available at unprecedented rates, and due to low-rate mortgages guaranteed by the Federal Housing Administration and Veterans Administration, more people were able to afford them than ever before. This was the beginning of rapid expansion away from the city (Thomas, 1998, pp. 36-37).

The expansion was aided by the growing popularity and affordability of the automobile. With more access to personal vehicles, businessmen were able to live in the suburbs and commute to work in the city with comfort and ease. Historian Kathleen Hulser argues this was the beginning of the “auto-flâneur” (1997, p. 9). The term, derived from Charles Baudelaire's *flâneur*, or “stroller,” is used to describe the new trend of viewing the world through the car windshield. The automobile was changing the way people travelled, interacted, and lived. It was a new culture. More time was being spent in automobiles than ever before. The car was becoming an extension of body, exhibiting preferences and
personality through style, color, and size. People felt a certain connection with their car, and were able to improve that connection as they gained more freedom and ability to alter the appearance of their vehicle (Husler, 1997, p. 9).

Vonnegut’s *Player Piano* reinforces the idea of the auto-flâneur. Throughout the novel, the city is most often described through the window of a passing car. On multiple occasions dialogue and discourse take place in the car. It is through the window that Vonnegut always describes the large recreational golf course, the bridge connecting the two sides of the city, and maintenance crews that are often seen repairing the roads. References are made to the congestion that used to clog the roads, back when people still had reason to cross the bridge and travel to the other side of the city. The vehicle is such a prevalent theme in the novel that at one point the protagonist, Paul, jokes about his wife saying, “He’d seen her drive a car to the house across the street from theirs” (Vonnegut, 1952, p. 247).

The prevalence of the car made it easier for people to access the areas outside of the city with large expanses of available real estate. This provided space for communities to spread out over several hundred acres, resulting in many low-density developments. The first of its kind was Levittown, designed by Levitt & Sons. The development was built on a 4,000-acre potato field on Long Island (Thomas, 1998, p. 36). In 1951, when the project was completed, the development had 17,447 homes in all. It was the first of its kind, inspiring many more which were quickly built after Levittown’s opening (Ruff, 2007, p. 43).

The community was characterized by its low-density, homogeneous, single-family home layout. Homes were methodically planned and designed so that they could be produced quickly and without error. Each home was constructed of prefabricated pieces,
which were dropped off at each site as needed. When performing at its height, Levitt & Sons boasted that they were finishing one house every 16 minutes (Ruff, 2007, pp. 46-47). Pictured in Figure 3 are workers standing around the various pieces of a Levittown home before assembly.

However, the prefabricated nature of the dwelling units received criticism from those outside of the community. The uniform style and structure of the homes appeared to be “conformist,” and “stifling.” Those who did not live in Levittown, or a similar development, saw the home as “endless rows of little boxes made of ticky-tacky,” and could not fathom a comfortable life within the neighborhood. On the contrary, those living in Levittown report that this was not the case and that the Levittown homes were built with quality material despite the fast production (Ruff, 2007, p. 44).

Simultaneously, downtowns were beginning to decline. Anyone who had the income needed to move out of the city was quickly moving to the suburbs to take part in the suburban lifestyle. The loss of population from downtown areas caused large retailers and department stores to struggle financially. Stores were forced to close or move out to the suburbs if they wanted to stay viable. The empty stores sat as symbolic reminders of the shift in living patterns (Isenberg, 2004, p. 189).
Those who were left downtown were either unable to afford life in the suburbs or forbidden from living in the communities. Restrictive covenants in suburban communities kept African Americans and "colored people" out of the suburbs, forcing them to stay in the city. Downtown retail converted to fit the new demographic, specializing in discount shopping centers and retail. The American downtown had transitioned from being the center of city life to nothing more than a "low class ethnic island" (Isenberg, 2004, p. 189).

In *Player Piano*, Vonnegut provides some commentary on the distinction between suburban and urban living. First, while he never directly describes the homes of the upper class in Illium, he makes reference to suburban Chicago developments, that the reader can only assume may be similar to those in Illium. Vonnegut writes, "[She] called to him from her station before the picture window in the front room of their prefabricated home in Proteus Park, Chicago, a post-war development of three thousand dream houses for three thousand families with presumably identical dreams" (Vonnegut, 1952, p. 160).

This description summons thoughts of the extensive development of Levittown. The house, titled "M-17," comes with "two bedrooms, living room with dining alcove, bath, and kitchen" (Vonnegut, 1952, p. 163). Vonnegut describes this as "simplified planning and production all the way round" (Vonnegut, 1952, p. 163). As he continues, Vonnegut is openly cynical toward this new post-WWII form that had captivated the United States. His decision to place this dystopian fiction in a suburban setting, rather than a decaying urban core, strongly reflects his reaction toward the direction he sensed America was heading.

As Vonnegut's novel progresses, it becomes apparent that he has completely eliminated the decaying downtown from this fictional future. While it is made known early on that those of lower, fixed-incomes live south of the river in Homestead, Paul's
experiences within Homestead do not give the impression of an urban environment. The area is described as bleak, with utilities that are constantly being tampered with and dull gray porches, but it is undoubtedly suburban.
Oryx and Crake (2003)

*Margaret Atwood*

*November 18, 1939*

Margaret Atwood was born in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada in 1939 but spent most of her early life growing up in Toronto. Until she was 11 years old she spent half of each year living in the wilderness with her family while her father worked as an entomologist for the Canadian government. She cites this experience as being very influential to her value for environmental protection and it is often reflected in her literature and poetry (Atwood, Margaret Eleanor (1939-), 1998).

In addition to being a writer, Atwood devotes her energies to photography, watercolor, and activism. She is involved in many causes relating to environmental activism, such as BirdLife International, Forest Stewardship Council, and Nature Conservancy. She is also highly involved with PEN Canada, a group that encourages and promotes freedom of expression. She has held the position of president of the organization in the past. Today she is the acting Vice President of the organization (Atwood, Margaret Eleanor (1939-), 1998).

Though from Canada, Atwood's work has become an international phenomenon. Many of her novels have become international best sellers, most notably *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Many of her literature and poetry pieces are taught in North American literature courses around the country. Additionally, her typically strong “modern urban woman” characters have made her books and poetry the focal point of many women’s studies courses (Atwood, Margaret Eleanor (1939-), 1998).
In 2003 she wrote *Oryx and Crake* which reflects on the looming threat of environmental disaster. *Oryx and Crake* follows Snowman, the protagonist, through his struggles as he learns to accept his new life in a world ruined by biological disaster and devoid of human life. Snowman is the only human being left alive, living among a new human-like breed known as the “Crakers,” which were genetically modified by Crake, Snowman’s friend, to function in the new environment brought about by the disaster. Crake creates the species to inhabit the earth after humans are gone. He attempts to eliminate pleasure, greed, and religion through genetic modification and environmental control, repairing many of the social and biological diseases that have plagued cities for nearly a century.

In the years after the disaster, Crake unknowingly becomes a deity for the Crakers, and Snowman is left to act as a liaison between the deceased creator and his creations. Through a series of flashbacks, Atwood paints a picture of what life was like in the final years before the disaster. She describes the volatile political, social, and economic structure that contributed to the collapse and juxtaposes these descriptions with commentary on life in the new world among the Crakers.

The pre-apocalyptic world described in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* is divided into two district regions: the pJeeblands and the Compounds. The Compounds are corporate neighborhoods in which privileged employees work and live. Every major corporation has a unique compound, which includes educational, recreational, and shopping facilities. Atwood compares the compounds to suburban development, describing the winding streets of the compounds populated with “large houses in fake Georgian and fake Tudor, and fake French Provincial,” styles (Atwood, 2003, p. 227).
There is a strong socioeconomic distinction between those ‘within’ the compounds and those ‘without.’ The story is narrated through the eyes of a “compound brat,” contributing to a cynical depiction of the outer city, or “pleeblands.” “Pleebland,” is the generic colloquialism used to describe the city where the common people live, meaning those who are not in families that work in the compounds. Separated from the compounds by large gates, security check-points, and barbed wire, the threat of disease and despair looms in the pleeblands. The following passage from *Oryx and Crake* illustrates the physical characteristics and social stereotypes that define the pleeblands:

Jimmy had never been to the city. He’d only seen it on TV – Endless billboards and neon signs and stretches of buildings, tall and short; endless dingy-looking streets, countless vehicles of all kinds, some of them with clouds of smoke coming out the back; thousands of people, hurrying, cheering, rioting. There were other cities too, near and far; some had better neighborhoods in them, said his father, almost like the Compounds, with high walls around the houses, but those didn’t get on TV much.

(Atwood, 2003, p. 27)

While living conditions vary from city to city, the pleeblands are generally viewed with disgust and fear by the upper elites. Many of the establishments found in the city would never exist in the compounds. Factories, small apartment units, bars, and gentleman’s clubs are common institutions in the city that would have never been planned into the structure of the compounds. Atwood describes a pleeb shopping mall with striking similarities to the compound mall, except for the sea of parking surrounding the mall, filled with an assortment of automobiles, rather than the compact, golf-cart-friendly lots in the
compounds. “Everything in the pleeblands seemed so boundless, so porous, so penetrable, so wide-open. So subject to chance,” Atwood continues (p. 196).

The pleeblands are plagued with vacancies. Throughout the novel, Jimmy makes references to vacant factories, apartments, make-shift lean-tos, and even parking lots, all contributing to an image of blight and despair in the city. The transition between pleeblands and compounds is a sprawling progression. Density begins to decrease, followed by a series of warehouses and parking lots, until finally the compound gates are reached.

Atwood alludes to a middle ground that is less elitist than the compounds, yet more desirable than the pleeblands. Known as the “Modules,” they appear to be small neighborhoods outside of the compounds where lesser employees of the major corporations live, commuting into the compounds each day for work by “sterile transport corridors,” or high-speed bullet train.

In addition to the built-form of the compounds and pleeblands, Atwood refers to a changing natural environment. She describes towns that were washed away due to a rising sea level and volcanic natural disaster, eliminating cities like New York and Boston. She also describes changing seasons and weather patterns. Interestingly, these are not cited as causes for the end of humankind, but more likely coincidental happenings.

**Atwood’s Oryx and Crake and the Post-Industrial City**

The post-industrial city emerged in the 1980s when large industry began to move out of cities, removing the primary economic base of many cities. Since the 1980s, the form of the post-industrial city has been adapting to accommodate the fragmentation left behind.
In the early 1980s, cities were a shell of what they used to be, plagued by poor automobile-oriented streets, steadily worsening retail environments, and an office-culture, forcing cities to close at 5:00 each day (Hall, 2005, pp. 98-107).

However, the “inner city” is in much worse condition than the city centers. Often referred to by urban geographers as the “twilight zone,” or “zone in transition,” the inner city is the area between the city center and the suburbs. The demographics of this area are usually low-income members of the working class, with large immigrant populations. Those living in the suburbs view the inner city with fear and paranoia, which is often reinforced by the media (Hall, 2005, pp. 116-120).

Urban geographers have argued that the city has taken on a new form. In the past, cities have typically developed in organized zones or rings, but today, geographers describe the post-industrial city as having taken on a “galactic” form. Similar to the stars and planets in the solar system, post-industrial cities feature large, impressive developments with very little in between. These developments range from new housing projects to large public facilities, such as airports and stadiums (Hall, 2005, p. 98).

In contrast, the outer limits of the city are home to residential suburban developments, often located along commuter sheds, connecting the suburbs to the city center. In the past, these were heavily used for daily commutes. However, in the postmodern city, fewer people are dependent on the city for work. This is due to more businesses moving to the outer edges of cities and the suburbs (Mattingly, 1997, pp. 42-44).

In *Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood seems to have used the image of the post-industrial city to characterize the dystopian environment. First, the majority of the novel
takes place within the walls of company Compounds. The Compounds are self-sustaining communities that house major corporations and their employees. They are often protected by a series of security features, including high surrounding walls. Within the Compound are single-family dwelling units, company office parks, and even small retail districts for families to utilize. There is almost no reason to ever leave the Compound.

Outside of the Compound are the “Pleebands,” which refers to the inner city, populated by low-income individuals, and lower-end retail. They are believed to be filthy areas, disease-ridden and dangerous. Though the Pleeblands are not as pristine as the Compounds, most of the Compounder’s perceptions are based on fear instilled by the media. However, not all areas of the Pleeblands are created equal. There are various degrees of filth and disgust that are generated from the different areas of the city. Therefore, some areas are characterized by declining retail and the loss of an economic base, while others are home to the poorest of the population, typically squatter developments populated with makeshift lean-tos. This is exhibited as Snowman, the protagonist, travels by high-speed rail from one Compound to another, viewing various Pleeblands as they pass by the window.

This brings to light one very important characteristic of the built environment in *Oryx and Crake*. The city is fragmented, consisting of individual, disconnected Compounds and the Pleeblands. In order to travel to another Compound, one must go by train or car. Nothing is within a short walking distance. This conjures up reminders of the hypothesized “Galactic” city model, as each Compound almost seems to be its own planet with nothing but space in between.
Synthesis and Analysis

*The Machine Stops, Player Piano, and Oryx and Crake*, all describe different futures for the city. *The Machine Stops*, by E.M. Forster, foresees a devastated and decaying earth that has become so wretched no human could ever comfortably inhabit it. Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* depicts a mechanized world of homogeny and monotony, and Margaret Atwood's post-apocalyptical novel, *Oryx and Crake*, showcases a fragmented city and the devastation left behind after a biological disaster destroys the world. Each novel presents a different picture of a pessimistic future, with frighteningly similar outcomes. Each of these stark futures reveals our darkest fears, furthering the idea that there is much to be learned from the ideas embedded in dystopian literature.

The original hypothesis predicted that the description of the city in dystopian literature would reveal problems with urban form and socioeconomic structure in cities at the time the novels were written. However, the hypothesis did not consider all of the complexities that the novels actually revealed in the fictional societies. The research demonstrated that dystopian literature exaggerates problems with the built environment and organization of the city at the time it was written, while using the built environment to enhance the commentary on socioeconomic structure.

The hypothesis was correct in predicting that the problems of urban form in the city would be depicted in the literature. This was done through extreme exaggeration, warning against a world that could exist if current conditions were allowed to continue without improvement. In *The Machine Stops* by E.M. Forster, the reader saw what the world would look like if the pollution of industrialization went unrestricted. Likewise, in *Player Piano*, Vonnegut created a world where suburban single-family living would become the
dominant form. Finally, *Oryx and Crake* showed a world plagued by extreme fragmentation. All of these are products of the issues affecting cities in the era and location that the author lived.

*The Machine Stops* is a warning to those living in the early 20th century, calling attention to the problems in the city to keep the situation from worsening. At the time that the story was written, British cities were experiencing heavy industrialization that was affecting the quality of life in the city. Forster depicts a world where pollution has become pervasive to the point where nothing can live on the surface of the earth. In describing a post-apocalyptic world, Forster is able to carry out the current state of affairs to its logical conclusion and show the reader what could happen if nothing changes.

Similarly, in *Player Piano*, Vonnegut cautions against the trend of suburbanization that was happening across the United States at the end of World War II. In his novel, everyone lives in a single-family, pre-fabricated home. Vonnegut does not even exclude the poor from this trend, placing them in similar suburban developments. The decaying urban core has been eliminated from this vision of the future, leaving only the bright, multi-colored homes of the rich, and the dull gray suburban homes of the poor. It is an extreme prediction that offers commentary on how quickly developments like Levittown were appearing around the country. At the end of the novel, in the same fashion as Forster, Vonnegut paints a picture of how this way of life could inevitably lead to the destruction of society. However, his vision of the end of society comments directly on society's reliance on mechanism, rather than the condition of the city. This enhances Vonnegut's commentary on the seeming perfection of a suburban community; he shows the reader that it is not the
beauty of suburban development that should be feared, but the comfort and monotony that comes with it.

Finally, *Oryx and Crake* warns against the pattern of fragmentation in the modern city. Atwood describes an extreme scenario where the city is divided between the Compounds and the Pleeblands. The Compounds are small, high-security pockets of beautiful, clean neighborhoods, while the Pleeblands fill in the gaps between the Compounds. The Pleeblands have no distinct character, but the living conditions vary from inadequate to unacceptable. Atwood appears to be drawing on “galactic” development patterns in the city, with small pockets of large planned development and very little between. This fragmented city is juxtaposed with a barren, post-apocalyptic world, continuing the trend toward total destruction that was also featured in the previous two novels.

All three novels featured post-apocalyptic conditions but the cause of the destruction varied between the novels. *Player Piano* and *The Machine Stops* both featured destruction from an over-mechanized world. However, *The Machine Stops*, featured two apocalyptic tragedies, the other of which stemmed from the over-polluted conditions of the industrial city. The destruction in *Oryx and Crake* was brought on by biological disaster rather than the physical problems of the city, making Forster’s use of post-apocalyptic society the only one that uses the problems of the physical city to demonstrate the possibility of disaster.

Referring back to the initial predictions of this paper, the findings related to urban form were congruent with the initial hypothesis but deviated when analyzing socioeconomic structure. The major difference was seen in the authors’ characterization of
socioeconomic structure. The hypothesis predicted that the problems of socioeconomic
class structure would be emphasized, just as the problems with urban form were
exaggerated. However, what the fictional pieces actually revealed was even more
intriguing. The three authors used the urban form as a medium for characterizing the
socioeconomic condition. For example, in *The Machine Stops*, where all people are social
and economic equals, there is no difference in the built environment from one location to
the next. Everyone lives in the same type of white room, located in the same type of
underground hallway, regardless of geographical location.

On the contrary, in *Player Piano* and *Oryx and Crake*, the authors use the built
environment to characterize extreme social polarization. In *Player Piano*, socioeconomic
division is aided by the Iroquois River, which bisects the city. The north is home to those
with high socioeconomic standing, while members of the working class occupy the south.
Though there are undeniable similarities in Vonnegut’s description of the built
environment on the north and south of the river, there are also inherent differences. The
homes may all be single-family, but the quality of life changes between the north and the
south. The northern side of the river is described as spacious and pristine, while the south
of the river, also known as Homestead, is bleak. Neighbors in the south are depicted
socializing in their front yards while the children play in the water from broken fire
hydrants. On the contrary, the people of the north side gather for parties and social events
at upscale establishments.

Similarly, Margaret Atwood uses the built environment to emphasize the social and
economic condition of the population. *Oryx and Crake* is plagued by extreme socioeconomic
polarization. This is characterized by the differences between the Compounds and the
Pleeblands. The Compounds are home to the rich members of major corporations, while the Pleeblands, similar to Homestead, are home to everyone else. However, there are significant differences between the descriptions of the Pleeblands and Homestead. The residents of Homestead are not thought to be equals with the engineers and managers in the North, but Vonnegut makes an effort to characterize the citizens with some semblance of dignity. However, in *Oryx and Crake*, those who live in the Pleeblands are described to be disease ridden and infected by incurable blight. This is furthered by the distinction between the Compounds and the Pleeblands. The high, heavily-secured walls of the Compounds furthers the idea that residents of the Pleeblands are dangerous, dirty, and should not be allowed near the upper class residents of the Compounds.

This overarching motive to describe the socioeconomic situation offers explanation for the tendency of dystopian authors to use a setting that has the superficial semblance of being a utopia to society. In all of the pieces, the authors featured a portion of the built environment that seemed to be without flaw. The individual rooms of *The Machine Stops*, the single-family homes of *Player Piano*, and the wealthy compounds of *Oryx and Crake*, all appear to be ideal living conditions at first glance. In doing so, the authors are able to create an environment that readers can relate to either through experience or through desire. However, as each fictional piece continues, the authors expose the problems of each living condition, challenging society’s idea of perfection. This helps to reinforce the persuasive power of each piece as the author deconstructs the societal ideal.

Dystopian literature is a valuable art form that can be used to inform and understand the problems that people experience throughout their daily lives in cities. It is through dystopian literature that society’s darkest nightmares are realized. From reading
*The Machine Stops*, *Player Piano*, and *Oryx and Crake*, it is apparent that the built form is a constant influence on the daily lives of the residents experiencing it. Thus, the problems described in dystopian literature reveal the societal fears that affect the city, making the dystopian genre a valuable tool for examination of the current state of affairs, not only with political and economic situations, but social and physical as well.

The value of dystopian literature is often discredited, placing utopian literature on a higher pedestal. However, this research concluded that there is much to be learned from the dystopian genre. This study looked specifically at what could be revealed about the built environment and socioeconomic organization of the city, which supplements previously conducted research on economic and political descriptions of dystopian societies. It is through dystopian literature that we see society's most feared future and that we are given the tools to make sure that it does not become reality, and it therefore, should not be discounted as a valuable tool for examination of the city.
References


