‘A true dystopia does not exist. The futures portrayed in dystopian literature are essentially utopias.’

How far do you agree with this analysis?

‘A utopia is a dystopia forced upon you by a madman’¹. This close relationship between utopias and dystopias has been problematic since the rise of the dystopian novel in the twentieth century. The two genres have been the subject of numerous critical volumes— and it is fair to say that the vast majority concern definition. Whilst these works may make for a drier read than a critical text dealing with character, for example, the issue of definitions in dystopian and other associated genres is complex and largely incomplete. The etymology² of both utopia and dystopia does set up the two concepts as mutually exclusive and is somewhat definitive, yet the nature of the genres is far too multifaceted to be defined by two black-and-white terms. Earlier criticism concerning dystopias³— it seems—take their definition of a ‘dystopia’ from C. Walsh’s 1962 study ‘From Utopia to Nightmare’: an ‘inverted utopia’. This simplistic definition has some merit in describing a prominent branch of literature— yet still leaves several primary works of ‘dystopia’ in limbo. Dystopian literature certainly has ‘vague generic boundaries’⁴ but some attempt needs to be made to make the distinction between the utopian and dystopian. It might instead be proposed that if one wishes to categorize, two principal definitions need to be examined. Aldridge pointed out ‘the terms satiric utopia and dystopia are the most frequently used’⁵ for novels that are ‘heterotopian’⁶— as Foucault’s attempt at collective labelling suggests. However, it is the term dystopia that causes problems among critics and the modern reader. The issues with vague definitions, coupled with the arguments of those who advocate a ‘reader-response’ critical perspective (with particular reference to the semantics of ‘dystopian’ literature), leaves the question: is there really evidence in texts that suggests the futures portrayed are pure dystopias?

Those who argue that there is a definite separation between utopian fiction (including the utopian satire) and works of dystopia are usually intentionalists. Aldridge states that the one distinction of dystopian novels is the author’s criticism of existing social trends without reference to utopian ideals⁷. The name ‘Gilead’ in The Handmaid’s Tale is worth analysing on this part. The term Gilead translates into the ‘hill of testimony’⁸ and is a reference from the Book of Genesis: ‘So he fled with all that he had; and he rose up, and passed over the river, and set his face toward the mount Gilead.’⁹ Gilead was renowned in Palestine for having fertile soils¹⁰ and this allusion plays on the 415

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¹ Sam J. Lundwall Utopia – Dystopia: Nedslag i framtidens politiska historia (1977) pg 2
² The suffix –topia derives from the Ancient Greek meaning ‘place’, whilst the prefixes ‘eu’ and ‘dys’ mean ‘good’ and ‘bad’ retrospectively.
³ Generally referring to the 1960s
⁴ David W. Sisk’s Transformations of Language in Modern Dystopias pg 10
⁵ Alexandra Aldridge Scientific Views of Dystopia Volume 3 (1984) pg 5
⁶ Michael Foucault Des Espace Autres (1967) xviii.
⁷ Alexandra Aldridge Scientific Views of Dystopia Volume 3 (1984) ix
⁸ Genesis 31:21.
⁹ Genesis 31:21.
preoccupation the fundamentalist government has with boosting the fertility rate. The first clue to the reader of the handmaids’ role as ‘two-legged wombs’ in Gilead is the dialogue the protagonist overhears between two Marthas: ‘Stillborn, it was.’ The fact that the household servants are gossiping about the outcome of a birth demonstrates how central the theme of fertility is to Gileadian society— which Offred informs the reader (or indeed listener) stems from the fact that ‘three out of four births result in shredders.’ The use of the noun shredders is dysphemistic— and reflects the tone of brutality that Atwood could be interpreted as representing elements of fundamentalism. The Republic of Gilead has been shown here to be built on passages of the Old Testament (note also the allusion to the story of Rachel and Leah which is embodied in the reconditioning ‘Rachel and Leah Centre’) —but in doing so has created a regime that is undeniably repressive and frightening to the feminist reader. This could be seen as oxymoronic; the Bible does not depict totalitarianism. Yet, it is through her sustained Biblical references that Atwood attacks the nature that underpins fundamentalism: the manipulation of scripture. This view is further consolidated by Atwood’s explicit statement that her portrayal of a theocratic regime was derived from the ‘deep foundation’ of puritanism that exists within the US. She terms her work ‘speculative fiction’ and believes that if such a fundamentalist group came to power in the western world, they ‘would select a few passages from the Bible to justify their actions, and it would lean heavily towards the Old Testament’. Indeed, a contemporary readership would have been familiar with the conflict between those who desired a reversion back to traditional gender roles and post-feminists who continued to fight for greater equality. It is likely that the majority would regard Gilead as a pure ‘dystopia’— the society acts as a warning to how the United States could end up. However, it is worth considering whether this ‘dystopian’ model built on feminism is particularly frightening to the modern western reader. Perhaps the parallels will be drawn with the more 21st century problem of Islamic extremism, which is a more viable scenario in the West today— showing limitations to the internationalist school of thought in the sense that even if the author is specifically critiquing one element of modern society, this may not hold as frightening with a different readership.

Huxley too manipulates religion in order to criticize, but with the opposite effect to Atwood’s fundamentalist Gilead. Instead, ‘The World State’ is characterized by an absence of a spiritual religion, yet the whole future is built upon worship of consumerism— a theme with which the modern reader will be very familiar. Huxley explores the increasing tendency towards mass-production and homogeneity by placing Henry Ford as a deity in the World State, replacing the phrase ‘Our Lord’ with ‘Our Ford’. The imagery of the cross is mutilated— both graphologically and spiritually— becoming a ‘T’ (another reference to Ford and his magnum opus ‘T-Model’). London’s Charing Cross becomes ‘Charing T’ and Lenina Crowne sports a ‘golden T dangled at her breast’. The word ‘breast’ is central to this sentence: not only has the cross been maimed, Huxley is now presenting it to the reader with the sexual juxtaposition with Lenina’s ‘pneumatic’ breast. Indeed at the time Huxley was writing, Britain’s women had just undergone a relative sexual boost.

11 ‘Shredders’ here means babies with physical deformities.
12 Genesis 29:31–35; 30:1–24
13 Alanna A. Callaway Women disunited: Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale as a Critique of Feminism (2008) pg 8
14 Margaret Atwood The Guardian Friday 20th January 2012
15 Margaret Atwood as cited by Robert McCrum: The Observer Sunday 28th November 2010
16 Margaret Atwood The Guardian Friday 20th January 2012
emancipation over the advancement of Christian, family values — and such opposing imagery could be seen as a denunciation of this. Both novels have been shown to criticize the present with reference to the future — and oddly enough have the shared technique of exploring the role religion plays in denoting a ‘wrong-turn’ in the line of causation during the history of each future. Certainly, intentionalists who stress the importance of authorial intent in distinguishing a true dystopia can be certain that both Atwood and Huxley intended— at least in part— for their works to function as critiques of the present and possible projections into the future. Both writers have published work demonstrating this — Huxley’s Brave New World: Revisited is essentially a critique of the prediction power of the original novel. If one takes Aldridge’s definition of the distinction of dystopian novels, both The Handmaid’s Tale and Brave New World could be seen as falling under that category.

Sisk, however, takes a more semantic approach to distinguish between ‘heterotopias’ and the pure dystopia. His argument that dystopias always depict horrible societies — which cannot be denied — will pose more questions than answers for the attentive reader owing to the subjective nature of the word bad. He states that one theme central to works considered to belong to the canon of dystopian literature is the control of language. One of the most sophisticated examples of such Orwell’s invention of Newspeak in Nineteen-Eighty Four and his insistence that language is the tool through which a totalitarian state can most effectively maintain its own power and stifle dissent is woven into his depiction of the future. Newspeak acts as a hyperbolic extended metaphor that symbolizes both censorship and propaganda — both of which are synonymous with contemporary and modern readers alike with draconian methods of government. The principles of Newspeak — ‘the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year’ — are seemingly based on the ideas of Wittgenstein, who stated ‘the limits of my language mean the limits of my world’. Indeed, the character of Syme acts as the personification of the ideology behind Newspeak within the narrative framework, and explains in Part One Chapter Five that ‘the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought’. This is a language that is stripped back to the bare bones; the eradication of synonyms and thus ambiguity results in the eradication of unorthodox thinking — or ‘thoughtcrimes’. Orwell explores this in the appendix: the word ‘free’ still existed but only in the physical sense — it could not be used in its old sense of “politically free” or “intellectually free,” since political and intellectual freedom no longer existed even as concepts, and were therefore of necessity nameless. The reader will associate this control of the masses through language with the Nazi regime or Stalin’s Russia — and whilst it may be anachronistic to suggest these societies were ‘dystopian’, the western reader will draw parallels nevertheless. Kumar suggests that Nineteen-Eighty Four is the most frightening work of dystopian literature to the modern English speaking reader because the modern western reader takes their free speech for granted, and the limitation of words marks the limitation of thought. However, the idea of Newspeak may have been received by the contemporary English reader under the shadow of Nazism and Stalinism with faint humour — after all, the benefit of hindsight was not at their disposal, and the whole novel may be taken as a satirical attack against their enemies rather than frightening as Kumar suggests. The scene in which Offred visits

17 David W. Sisk Transformations of Language in Modern Dystopias pg 8
18 Often hailed as one of the principal examples of dystopian literature according to Neil Postman in Amusing Ourselves to Death (1985): the other work cited was Huxley’s Brave New World pg 1
19 The appendix also offers a deeper insight.
20 The use of propaganda was one of the most salient methods of control in Nazism, who — much like the Ministry of Truth in Nineteen-Eighty Four — had government departments devoted to controlling the press.
21 Krishan Kumar Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times pg 321
the shops in *The Handmaid’s Tale* also demonstrates this compression of language; ‘the letter was painted out, when they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us.’ Whilst it is clear Atwood is not making the same linguistic assumptions as Orwell, she is recognising the power of language as a form of control— which is perhaps more effective in its influence on the modern reader than the complex invention of Newspeak in terms of characterization: the narrator’s concerns of control are broad and familiar—she is the downtrodden voice of oppression as opposed to the more heroic Winston. Sisk’s approach to the role of language as a feature of control in futures he deems as ‘dystopian’ has been seen here to be central to creating an image of a society that could be described as being ‘horrible’ to the modern reader.

However, whilst Aldridge’s intentionalist and Sisk’s semantic approach can be seen to shed some light on the genre boundaries of Foucault’s so-titled ‘heterotopias’, they fail to incorporate fundamental issues in labelling works as pure ‘dystopias’. Perhaps the biggest flaw of Aldridge’s argument that all dystopias exist to criticize social trends is that she neglects to mentions the issue of satire within key ‘dystopian’ novels— both of utopian works and contemporary society. To paraphrase Frye’s work on what constitutes a utopian satire in works that may have been ‘mislabelled’ as pure dystopias, he argues there are two distinct elements. The first is concerned with wit and humour— generally focused at the modern world. Take *Brave New World*, which is often cited amongst the best ‘dystopian’ novels but whose narrative form is seen to be undeniably satirical. The passage in which Fanny Crowne and Lenina are discussing sexual relationships is typical of Huxley’s multi-layered satire:

> ‘Nodding, “He patted me on the behind this afternoon,” said Lenina.

> “There, you see!” Fanny was triumphant. “That shows what he stands for. The strictest conventionality”’

The first indication of satire lies in the names of the characters. Lenina’s name is a feminization of the former leader of Communist Russia, Vladimir Lenin. Fanny could be derived from Fanny Kaplan— a socialist who tried to assassinate Lenin. The fact that they are seen as friends here conveys a strong sense of irony on Huxley’s part. In this passage, he is perhaps satirizing the fickle nature of the extreme left in the process of *mise-en-scene*— the characters are presented to the reader in the almost ridiculous setting of the ‘GIRLS’ DRESSING-ROOM’— oxymoronically described as being a ‘deafening chaos of arms and bosoms and underclothing’. The fact that they are discussing ‘patting on the behind’ further adds to the satirical attack executed by Huxley: the contemporary reader would have known these figures as fierce revolutionaries and here they are characterized as gossips— although it is worth noting this unsubtle allegory of political ideologies may be unfamiliar to the modern reader. Similarly, the wit of Huxley is woven throughout this extract. The characters of Lenina and Fanny, who are both loyal to the World State, are not seen— as similar characters such as Serena Joy in *The Handmaid’s Tale*— as evil characters who conform to the totalitarian regime; but as comical figures who truly believe in the ‘progress’ society has undergone. The fact that Huxley sets up the two lines of dialogue as opposing ideas to the modern reader (patting someone on the behind is not seen as being ‘strictly conventional’) could be interpreted as being humorous— which is consolidated by the choice of the word ‘triumphant’. Ironically here 2174

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22 Northrop Frye *Theory of Archetypes* (1957) pg 224
Fanny is seen as possessing the higher moral code. The satirical tone of the text that has been emphasized here seems to counter both Sisk and Aldridge’s notion of a dystopia.

Frye’s second element of satire is ‘a sense of attack’. This can be seen in novels that are traditionally— and perhaps wrongly—labelled as dystopias in the form of an attack against utopian ideals. Chapter Five in *The Handmaid’s Tale* offers the reader Offred’s account of visiting the main shops in Gilead. The shop that is conveyed by the symbol of ‘three eggs, a bee, a cow. Milk and Honey’ is the most poignant of the three that she recalls. Whilst the three pictures themselves are rather mundane— and perhaps would even stand as familiar on shop signs to the modern reader— the fact that the Offred recalls the name as ‘Milk and Honey’ could imply a deliberate attack by Atwood on utopian visions. The diction on its own already connotes softness and gentleness but the salient notion— which is certainly the main motif in *The Handmaid’s Tale*— is the phrase’s biblical meaning, ‘And he hath brought us into this place, and hath given us this land, even a land that floweth with milk and honey’ 23 refers to the land that God promised to Moses and the Israelites— an example of perhaps one of the first ‘utopias’. The fact that the ‘land of milk and honey’ has been reduced to the name of a grocery shop in the centre of Gilead could be interpreted as a complex metaphor for the idea that a utopia cannot be manifested in material terms. The shop is at the geographical centre of Gilead, which could be interpreted as allegorical—the fact that the desire to create a ‘utopia’ was at the heart of the establishment of the fundamentalist society. This is further seen in Chapter Thirty-Two when the Commander states the rationale behind the coup was the idea that they ‘thought we could do better’— and it worth noting the modern reader may fell the mundane nature of this statement undermines the semantic value. The hope of creating a utopia is still there, but is represented by a place that is relatively insignificant in the narrative framework. The metaphor of Milk and Honey seems to challenge Sisk’s view that *The Handmaid’s Tale* could be considered a pure dystopia because it creates a ‘miserable society without directly attacking utopian ideals’. 24

Atwood’s attack on utopia is certainly more subtle than Huxley’s more blatant derision of H.G Wells’ vision of a technology-led utopia 25. The only direct reference to Wells is fleeting and again in the form of characterization— Fanny Crowne tells Lenina that “‘Dr.Wells advised me to have a pregnancy substitute.’” This may not seem particularly provocative to the modern reader, but Huxley couples this reference with Lenina having a perceived lack of confidence in ‘Dr.Wells’ advice: “‘Well, I hope he’s right.’”. Similarly, the opening chapter presents the Bakonvsky Process to the reader, through the narrative voice of the ‘Director of the Hatcheries and Conditioning.’ The language is a far cry from the rich, sensory description that characterizes the first person narration in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and Huxley’s description is littered with technological diction such as ‘laboratory’, ‘microscopes’ and ‘instruments’—mirroring the form of a scientific manual. This echoes Wells’ ideas of a future built on science and technology— a future in which genetic modification is the norm. The Director takes a group of students ‘each of them carried a note-book in which, whenever the great man spoke, he desperately scribbled’— which follows the genre structure of utopian novels, in which an elevated member of the utopian community shows an outsider the society. Huxley further documented this link between Well’s work and *Brave New World* in many of his 2800

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23 Deuteronomy 29:6
24 David W. Sisk Transformations of Language in Modern Dystopias pg 8
25 See H.G Wells’ *A Modern Utopia* (1905) and *Men Like Gods* (1923)
personal letters, stating once ‘All’s Well that ends Wells’ in jest at the anthropological assumptions that characterised Wells’ portrayal of a possible utopian future — buttressing the view that the purpose of *Brave New World* is not to present to the modern reader a pure vision of a dystopia, but rather a satirical critique of utopian visions.

Based on the evidence in the texts — all three of which are held to be dystopian — it seems that there is indeed no such thing as a ‘pure dystopia’. Although Alridge’s intentionalist argument does highlight a shared purpose of criticism within texts depicting the future, it ignores the authorial inclination towards satire — which shows limitations to the idea that there can be an inherent dystopia. Indeed, studying texts from the point of view of the author is generally dangerous and often ignores the changing and complex notion of the reader. It is a weak author who will try and impose their views on the reader, texts that are most successful allow the reader to come to their own conclusions. This is where Sisk’s semantic approach is far more fruitful. Of course, a future should be labelled a ‘dystopia’ if the reader considers the society portrayed as inherently bad. Yet the subjective nature of the reader-response view does not allow for collective labelling: one man’s dystopia is another’s utopia. A fundamentalist may regard Gilead as a utopia; in the same way that an extreme communist may believe Oceania is utopian. The problem, however, is not that ‘dystopias’ do not exist in literature. The issue here is the difficulty in attempting to label a genre that is so dependent on the reader. In essence, no critic can effectively dictate whether a novel depicts a ‘bad-society’, or indeed a ‘good-society’. This means that no future can be labelled as a ‘pure’ dystopia but does not mean that all futures portrayed are utopias. Instead, if one wishes to label collectively, Foucault’s all-encompassing term ‘heterotopian’ should be taken — and allow the reader to reach their own conclusion on whether a text is ‘dystopian’, ‘utopian’, ‘utopian satire’ or otherwise. **TOTAL WORD COUNT 3120**
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