

# Young people's dystopian novels as a laboratory for philosophical thought

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## Abstract

This article argues that the literary characteristics of the dystopian children's novel predispose it to philosophy. To support this thesis, I show the limits of Lipman and Sharp's conception and use of literature in Philosophy for Children. Next, I examine the specific value of literature, particularly science fiction, in fostering philosophical reflection. Finally, I describe the dystopian reading pact and its potential for developing philosophical dispositions in adolescents, among others.

## Keywords

dystopian novels, philosophy for teenagers, reading pact

## Introduction

Dystopian novels for young people to philosophise? At first glance, this might seem surprising, but literary devices have been used throughout the history of philosophy. Think of the allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic* (375 BC/1943) or Descartes's malignant genius, Locke's prince and cobbler, Putnam's brain in a vat, and Foot's trolley problem, as famous examples of literary devices in philosophy. These devices illustrate philosophical theses, create paradoxes, provide counterexamples, or test new concepts. The use of literary devices in philosophical fictions seems omnipresent, to the point of being constitutive of philosophy.

However, even if the use of fiction is recurrent in the history of philosophy, literature—especially dystopian novels—might seem radically different in both aim and method. On the one hand, science-fiction literature, of which dystopia is a sub-genre, is often seen as entertainment and therefore not very serious. On the other hand, in a philosophical text, which is approached seriously, the thesis is supported by reasons and not narrative fiction. The type of writing that seems to correspond best to the specific work of philosophy, with its aim of objectivity and clarity, reduces rhetorical, sensitive and emotional dimensions to the bare minimum. Consider Kant's

remark (1795) about the beauty of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's style, in which he denies the philosophical text any right to appeal to the aesthetic and the sensitive:

It is an inconvenience to the understanding to have taste. I have to read and reread Rousseau until the beauty of the expression no longer disturbs me at all; only then can I apply my reason to understanding him. (Kant 1795, p. 30)

On this view, works of literature would at worst be obstacles to clarity and rigour of thought, at best pleasant illustrations of arguments that could be established differently, more rigorously, and more logically. In any case, true philosophy would emerge outside fiction.

Rather than offering a philosophical reading of dystopian novels, this article defends the idea that dystopian novels for young people, due to their literary characteristics, are conducive to philosophising. I will first dissent from Lipman and Sharp's conception of the novel in P4C (Philosophy for Children). I will then examine the specific value of literature for learning to philosophise. Finally, based on evidence from a year-long experience with secondary school students in France, I will highlight the dystopian reading pact and its ability to develop philosophical dispositions.

### **Novels for learning to reason: The Lipmanian model**

The deliberate use of narrative to teach young people to philosophise is often justified by the complexity and the lack of appeal of canonical texts in the philosophical tradition. Indeed, it is hard to imagine an introduction to philosophy beginning with Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* or Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*! Narrative, being more accessible and engaging, helps bridge the gap between philosophy and the world of childhood experience and the rationality of the young.

Lipman and Sharp wrote novels to overcome 'one of the greatest obstacles to the practice of philosophy by children,' namely 'the formidable terminology of the tradition' (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan 1980, p. 43). Pioneers of the Philosophy for Children movement, Lipman and Sharp developed their approach in the 1970s, using specially designed philosophical novels for children, accompanied by teaching guides. There is no technical vocabulary, no mention of philosophers or philosophical movements, as these elements are embedded in the everyday experiences of child characters, who learn to reason and form judgements in response to the stories.

Lipman states 'Underlying the newer approach is the notion that there are ways of engaging children in philosophical repertoire' (Lipman & Sharp 1978, p. 86) and 'As a result, a transitional literature must be created to prepare the way for the encounter with primary texts in later schooling' (Lipman 1988, p. 23). Taking the form of a dialogical enquiry, they would allow young readers to explore ideas without being confronted with the authority of an author (Sasseville 2019). They invite children to examine their daily lives from a philosophical perspective, and in so doing adopt a resolutely realistic approach.

For Lipman and Sharp, their philosophical novels present a repertoire of philosophical ideas designed to suit children. They offer a place for 'teaching reasoning' (Lipman 1976, p. 29). They expose the child-reader to stories whose aim is to provoke astonishment and questioning, to provoke reflection, and to lead them to think about these questions themselves. To fulfil this role, their novels revolve around a central principle: modelling. This is done in two ways.

Firstly, modelling of the method of the community of inquiry is transmitted through reading these stories. Instead of discovering philosophy and logic as completed disciplines, they want to teach the repertoire and the methods of philosophy through the association of dialogue and reflection:

The books are works of fiction in which the characters eke out for themselves the laws of reasoning and the discovery of alternative philosophical views that have been presented through the centuries. The method of discovery for each of the children in the novels is dialogue coupled with reflection. (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan 1980, pp. 82–83)

As the children who people the novel come to engage in intellectual cooperation, and so to form a community of inquiry, the story becomes a paradigm for the live children in the classroom. Indeed, every such novel aims at being exemplary by portraying fictional children in the act of discovering the nature of the discipline in which and about which the children in the classroom are expected to think. (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan 1980, p. 6)

Secondly, the characters themselves are seen as role models. Lipman's bet is that real children will have the impulse to emulate the thinking of the people they encounter in their reading:

The fictional children in the novels are bound to serve as models (...) fictional models of children who are intrigued by what is problematic in their experience and sufficiently provoked by it to want to inquire into it. (...) Moreover, the portrayal of the children in the novel is of thinking children, children engaging in mental acts and wondering about those very acts, so that what is characterized is the life of thought itself—or the life of youthful thought, at any rate—in all of its dialectical complexity and with a fair amount of its illogicality and irrationality. (Lipman 1988, p. 147).

Child characters are examples—more than ideals—of commitment to the intellectual process, and each embodies a style of thinking, a philosophical perspective. For Lipman and Sharp, this modelling only works if the child-readers identify with the child-characters. This is why the novels are divided up by age group: *Elfie* (1988) (Kindergarten); *Kio and Gus* (1982) (1st grade), *Pixie* (1981) then *Nous* (1996) (Elementary School); then *Harry* (1978) (6th grade); *Lisa* (1983) and *Suki* (1978) (7th and 8th) and *Mark* (1980) (High School).

The novels portray models of enquiry, models of cooperation, and models of caring, sensitive individuals. But this approach to literature poses several problems. Firstly, it is an instrumental approach to literature. Reading is first and foremost about learning to think. Secondly, in the modelling principle, we see in order to know, we read the character's reasoning in order to reason ourselves, whereas the transition from one to the other is far from obvious. On the other hand, if it works, it is also possible that children or teenagers feel too guided, that they perceive that there are expected questions and answers. Reasoning is already formalised and mapped out for them but without their participation.

Thirdly, the search for identification with characters, as understood by Lipman and Sharp, is also open to criticism. As Clémentine Beauvais, author and translator of children's books, and teacher and researcher at the University of York, UK, has shown, fiction is 'par excellence the search for and understanding of otherness', and it is thanks to this 'initial and active decentring' (2013) that I can paradoxically learn something about myself.

I must not identify with a character, accept this easy and comfortable posture, passively adhere to a perspective that seems familiar to me. On the contrary, I must modify myself, reject the comfort of similarities and celebrate the disjunctions between my identity in formation and that of

the characters. I must at all costs maintain a critical distance from the character's choices; understand that it is possible for this character I love to be wrong. This character is not "me in the book": it's someone else. This is where the psychological ambivalence, the ethical dilemmas, the multitude of little precipices that shatter the text are essential. [Roland] Barthes speaks of the enjoyment that "nails" the reader, that makes him or her a shaken, uncertain subject, for whom the text denies the comatose comfort of the simple "pleasure" of reading. (Beauvais 2013, paragraphs 8-9)

Paradoxically, by choosing characters who are very close to the age of the target audience, Lipman and Sharp's approach could prevent this critical distancing and risk the development of critical thinking. This is why, according to Rudine Sims Bishop (1990), young people need to be offered not only 'mirror novels' to help them construct their identity and find their bearings in this period of physical and psychological transformation, but also 'window novels' to open them up to other cultures, times or perspectives. Indeed, the lack of cultural diversity has been identified as a major drawback of Lipman's novels (Sandoval 2019). It is precisely the strength of literature that it can create identification when the reader is not identical to the character.

Moreover, it may be that the identification desired by Lipman cannot actually take place because, as Joanna Haynes and Karin Murriss show, 'The novels' purpose of modelling the practice of communities of enquiry explains why the fictional characters in the novels are quite unlike "normal" children' (2012, pp. 56–57).

The philosophical thinking in the novels is enacted by fictional, thoughtful children who reflect explicitly on their thought processes in the way adult philosophers would do, but that children "normally" do not. (Murriss, 2016, p. 2)

The purpose of these novels is not to offer narratives rich in events or embodied experiences. By prioritising a quasi-pedagogical staging of philosophical reasoning, this approach tends to diminish narrative richness and the complexity of lived situations. As a result, the fictional children in these stories bear little resemblance to real children: 'they are primarily "thinkers" rather than "doers"' (Haynes & Murriss 2012, pp. 56–57), evolving in a setting where thought unfolds in an exemplary manner, yet sometimes at the expense of spontaneity, concrete dilemmas, and the uncertainty inherent in genuine experiences of life.

Fourth, Lipman's approach involves a deficit approach to literature, designed to address the immature language and cognitive skills of young people. Thus, philosophical novels have a prominent place in the philosophy curriculum for children but only until they can rise to the level of real philosophical texts. Moreover, Lipman himself admits that he wrote his novels 'despite his total lack of familiarity with the techniques of writing novels' (Lipman 1978, p. v).

This deficit and instrumental (modelling) approach to literature explains why Lipman prefers to write his own novels rather than base his program on the rich heritage of existing children's literature. Lipman is strongly opposed to the use of children's literature because it does not depict the thinking of fictional children (Lipman 1991, p. 277). But the rejection of literature in general also stems from the implicit theory of meaning, according to which there are three types of meaning: literal meaning (scientific explanations), symbolic meaning (fairy tales, fantasy and folklore) and philosophical meaning, which, according to Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan, is neither literal nor symbolic (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan 1980, pp. 33-36). The programme's philosophical novels incorporate elements of formal and informal logic. Lipman considers that the meaning of a statement depends largely on the logical inferences that can be drawn from it. But he seems to rule out the role of the imagination and emotions at this basic level of giving meaning to our experiences and the fact that the reader is not a passive recipient but constructs meaning from his or her own experience. This is the subject of the second section of this article.

### **Reasoned and distanced reading versus sensitive and emotional reading?**

What makes a book thought-provoking? In my view, it is neither the theme, nor the author, nor the deliberate inclusion of philosophical ideas. With my choice of dystopian novels for young people, I reject a deficit and instrumental vision of literature, and I am favouring a hermeneutic approach. Only text that contains ambiguity and complexity that encourages interpretative autonomy and that, because of its literary specificities, requires a special effort on the part of the reader, is thought-provoking.

Reading is a dynamic process in which the reader plays a central role in constructing meaning. According to Iser (1976) and Eco (1979), a literary text does not convey a fixed meaning but rather invites active interpretation: the reader anticipates, fills in gaps, and actualises what remains implicit. Incompleteness is thus a fundamental characteristic of literary works (Bayard 1998, pp. 127-128). Certain elements remain unresolved—characters' pasts, undescribed settings, implicit thoughts—creating

what Iser terms ‘gaps’, which the reader must bridge. This absence of information is not merely a lack but a structural feature that fosters interpretative engagement. Some texts even deliberately introduce ambiguities of comprehension (resistant texts) and interpretation (proliferating texts) (Tauveron 2003, pp. 26-36), thereby enhancing their evocative power and capacity to provoke wonder. The ambiguity maintained in *Méto* by Yves Grevet, for example, heightens the atmosphere of oppression and uncertainty characteristic of dystopian fiction.

Interpretation also relies on the reader’s horizon of expectation, that is, the cultural references and personal experiences they bring to the reading process, which explains the diversity of meanings attributed to a single text. Some narratives play with these expectations by subverting them, as seen in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (1915/2016), which confronts the reader with the intrusion of a fantastical element into a realistic setting.

Moreover, reading is framed by a *reading pact*, an implicit agreement between the author and the reader that defines the status of the text, and the expectations associated with its genre. However, this framework is not rigid: a work can invite multiple interpretations. Plato’s *Symposium* (380 BC/1993), for instance, can be read as a philosophical dialogue on love, a dramatic work, or, in light of contemporary debates, from a feminist or queer perspective. Nevertheless, while a text allows for some degree of indeterminacy, this openness does not permit entirely arbitrary interpretations: *Madame Bovary* (1857/2001) cannot be read as a science fiction novel. Ultimately, reading is a continuous negotiation between the text and its reader, where meaning emerges through the interaction between textual gaps, the horizon of expectation, and the reading pact.

To understand its importance, let us take the example of the picture books, another popular medium in P4C, but one whose literary specificities are rarely invoked to justify the choice of its use in these practices. Joanna Haynes and Karin Murriss (2012, pp. 120–121) and Edwige Chirouter (2015, pp. 132–135) are among the few to offer criteria for choosing texts that are rooted in the literary content of picture books. The use of picture books is usually justified because it allows for continuity between children’s daily lives and philosophical reflection, identification-distancing, variation of material, integration of P4C into other courses, and the aesthetic appeal of picture books (Mailhot-Paquette & Gagnon 2022, pp. 102–103), for the modelling (Point 2024) or, as denounced by Joanna Haynes and Karin Murriss (2012), ‘useful instruments to

start discussions about anti-social behaviour such as bullying, stereotyping, or intolerance (with the main purpose of changing such behaviour' (p. 37).

Compared to the novel, however, the picture book has its own distinctive characteristics: two narratives, one verbal and the other pictorial. Text and image jointly construct meaning through an interplay of blanks in the text, blanks in the images, and the association or dissociation of text and images (symmetry, complementarity, enrichment, counterpoint), or its sequentiality.

The process of "reading" a picture book may be represented by a hermeneutic circle as well. Whichever we start with, the verbal or the visual, it creates expectations for the other, which in turn provides new experiences and new expectations. The reader turns from verbal to visual and back again, in an ever-expanding concatenation of understanding. Each new rereading of either words or pictures creates better requisites for an adequate interpretation of the whole. Presumably, children know this by intuition when they demand that the same book be read aloud to them over and over again. Actually, they do not read the same book; they go more and more deeply into its meaning. Too often adults have lost the ability to read picture books in this way, because they ignore the whole and regard the illustrations as merely decorative. (Nikolajeva & Scott 2006, p. 2)

The child-reader's astonishment arises from the discrepancy in our expectations as readers, and not just from the way the characters' astonishment is presented. The astonishment comes from the way in which text and image play with our reading of a picture book (and not a novel). In other words, it is not because we see the character being astonished or questioning him/herself, but because the story itself, as it is told, astonishes or questions us. Nodelman (2005) states that 'picture books work to make their audiences aware of the limitations and distortions in their representations of the world. Close attention to picture books automatically turns readers into semioticians' (p. 86).

This dynamic of reading, which engages both interpretation and astonishment, invites us to reconsider the way different forms of literature cultivate thought. If the picture book fosters a playful and multi-layered hermeneutic engagement through the interplay of text and image, philosophical reflection on literature also leads us to examine how reading shapes our rational and emotional faculties.

Martha Nussbaum extends this inquiry by applying the notion of a reading contract to philosophy. According to her, the style of a text is never neutral: it shapes its content, influences the reader's experience, and reflects a specific conception of human rationality (Nussbaum, 1986). For example, the novels of Lipman and Sharp promote the normative ideal of analytical rationality. Where some texts cultivate a reasoned and distanced reading, others demand a sensitive and emotional engagement.

While philosophical texts typically rely on a cold, abstract rationality, Nussbaum (1986) argues that certain subjects cannot be addressed in the same way. This reflection leads her to question the limits of conventional philosophical style. She asks how one can write about human vulnerability and fragility in a way that remains true to their nature. Some literary works, she suggests, may be better suited than an ethical treatise to capturing fundamental human experiences such as love, courage, doubt, or ambition.

Following the example of theories of reception in literature, she chooses to pay attention to the type of work that the text demands, and therefore the skills that it develops, from those who read it with the required attention. Just as the picture book's textual and visual ambiguities stimulate interpretative agency, literary narratives can foster an ethical sensitivity through the reader's immersion in characters' experiences. Nussbaum highlights that the way a text is written not only shapes the philosophical content it conveys but also cultivates the interpretative, moral, and emotional skills developed by the attentive reader, which she considers essential for philosophising.

Nussbaum (1990) analyses *The Golden Bowl* (1904) by Henry James, showing that reading this novel attentively requires the ability to perceive the psychological and moral nuances of the characters. This demand cultivates a form of ethical sensitivity, an essential skill for philosophical reflection on morality. This ability comes from a power specific to literature because it has the capacity to let us enter into the reasons of others through empathetic imagination, thanks to its 'thought experiments' (Bouveresse 2008, p. 115). Through immersion, it broadens our perception because it invites us to live vicarious experiences, through narrative imagination to have 'the effect it has' (Nussbaum 2015, p. 35). As such, literature allows us to 'examine the inner life of another', to put ourselves in their shoes. Nussbaum (1990) writes:

Literature is an extension of life not only horizontally, bringing the reader into contact with events or locations or persons or problems he or she has not otherwise met, but also, so to speak, vertically, giving the

reader experience that is deeper, sharper, and more precise than much of what takes place in life. (p. 48)

She argues that novels like *Middlemarch* (1993) by George Eliot force the reader to adopt another's perspective, fostering cognitive and emotional empathy, which is crucial for philosophical reflection on justice and the recognition of others (Nussbaum 1990).

Yves Citton (2007) likens reading literature to a 'fitting room', where we can take on different roles in the imagination. By immersing themselves in all sorts of experiences, affective, emotional, psychological, but also ideological and ethical, readers are subjects 'who allow themselves to be, in part, redrawn by the text' (Jouve 2014, p. 7). And it is precisely this emotional intensity of literary writing that broadens the reader's horizon, allows them to penetrate the meaning of a situation, and thereby stimulate their empathy and imagination.

Can the cold and abstract thought experiments proposed by philosophers really make us philosophise in the same way? Like these authors, I believe that:

Emotions are not used as "hooks" to "catch" children's attention and commitment to the construction of new ideas, but it is the emotional dimension of a narrative that provides insight into its meanings. (Haynes & Murris 2012, p. 101)

Nussbaum (1986) also explores how works like plays by the Attic dramatist Euripides require intellectual and emotional engagement from the reader, compelling them to grapple with complex moral dilemmas. Active reading of these texts goes beyond understanding an argument; it shapes the ability to perceive and feel the complexity of ethical choices.

For centuries, it was believed that a productive mind operates with abstract concepts logically (Egan 1992, p. 62). However, the entire mind—not just the logical-mathematical aspect—is engaged in understanding stories or philosophising. Rational thinking cannot be confined to a mere set of reckoning skills but is intrinsically 'tied up with all these hitherto neglected attics, basements, and hidden rooms of the mind, in which emotions, intentions, metaphors, and the imagination cavort' (Egan 1992, p. 63; quoted by Haynes & Murris 2012, p. 74). This is why I agree with Haynes and Murris (2012) in suggesting a 'more "expanded" notion of rationality' (p. 68) which

inevitably has consequences for the way in which I consider the type of faculties, pedagogies and materials that make philosophising possible.

Thus, rather than opposing reasoned and distanced reading to sensitive and emotional reading, these two dimensions appear intertwined: thought-provoking literature, whether a picture book or a novel, engages the reader in a process where rational analysis and affective response co-construct meaning.

### **The dystopian reading pact encourages readers to philosophise**

What changes do dystopian novels bring about in their readers? What dispositions or skills, but also what work of the imagination and emotions, are mobilised by reading a dystopian novel? The reading pact of dystopian novels for teenagers is a crucial aspect to consider when examining their philosophical potential. In his book *La Dystopie* (2019), Laurent Bazin, a lecturer at the University of Paris-Saclay, argues that ‘dystopia is not just a narrative form or an aesthetic category, but a vision of the world that is also a way of thinking’ (p. 7). I argue that this way of thinking is properly philosophical, and that reading dystopias helps to develop philosophical attitudes and skills in teenagers. Martha Nussbaum defends literature as an invitation to experiment, to explore other facets of reality, to imagine other possibilities. Dystopian novels have this capacity.

Dystopia is a sub-genre of science fiction and shares its ‘rational novelistic conjecture’, to use Versins’ (1972, pp. 8-9) expression. It involves extrapolation, hypothesising, and novelistic speculation. In dystopias, the form of the novel is not neutral and it plays with the skill of reading. Dystopias explore counterfactual reasoning, posing questions like: What if ... we could rent a younger body (*Starters*)? What if the Paris Commune had not been a failure (*Les Mystères de Larispem*)? What if everyone had to be beautiful (*Uglies*)? What if differences were eliminated (*The Giver*)? What if the ecologists were in power (*Un Monde pour Clara*)? The dystopian novel takes the form of what Zola (1880) called in the 19th century ‘the experimental novel’.

Science fiction can project us into a universe that is very different, but not totally alien from our own. Even though, in fantasy, the author can make the situations presented plausible enough for the reader to believe them, the critical analogy—an intellectual process in which a fictional situation serves as a distorted mirror to illuminate and question real-world issues—works more effectively when the suspension of disbelief is easier, as it is in dystopia. Suspension of disbelief, a concept introduced by the English poet Coleridge, refers to the willingness of a reader or audience to temporarily

accept and believe the improbable or fantastical elements in a story in order to engage with it.

The dystopian novel allows us to broaden our perception of the world and the times in which we live. These new perspectives invite the reader to adopt a critical stance towards the society presented in the book. The pact implies that the reader understands that the author is using the dystopian world as a mirror to reflect on contemporary problems and to criticise certain social, political or technological trends.

To understand this particularity of dystopia, we need to make a distinction between utopia, counter-utopia and dystopia. While all three present a critique of society, there are some differences.

Utopian fiction presents a perfect world that is supposed to reveal all the imperfections of our own. But by presenting a critique of the real world, utopian fiction can fail to question its own principles and in turn offer itself as a cold, abstract project to be achieved, like a real brave new world. The absolutisation and hyper-rationality are at the heart of utopian fiction: the individual is part of the whole, and every aspect of daily life is instrumentalised and mathematically controlled (number of meals, sexual relations, hours of work, sleep, children, etc.). By taking utopia literally and pushing its limits to the extreme, dystopia draws our attention to the utopian temptation to replace one dogma with another. What distinguishes utopia from dystopia is that the latter introduces a critical voice into its narrative in the form of a single character capable of introducing action into the frozen universe of utopia. A counter-utopia is not the best of worlds, but the worst. Usually the characters, but always the reader, see rebellion and resistance as a matter of course.

Dystopia is dialectical in nature: it is the critique of critique. For example, in *Méto*, by Yves Grevet (2008), when the children finally manage to free themselves from their prison school, they rebuild a world of rules and punishments. In Nicola Morgan's *Un Monde Sans Rêves* (2008), the ending suggests that a new, liberticidal world is on the horizon. The story uses multiple stratagems to create indeterminacy in a variety of emotional forms: unease, embarrassment, confusion, astonishment. And it is from this indeterminacy that the inquiry is born.

Bazin (2019) considers that a dystopia is a utopia that has agreed to be a novel, in other words, with action and adventures. The reader is directly involved in the proposed model of society, experiencing from the inside what it is like to be a utopian. The 'screen of the character' (Chirouter 2011, p.79) allows the reader to live vicariously

through what would be far too risky in real life. For example, while it may be fascinating to imagine a world where hereditary defects and diseases have been eliminated and inequalities have disappeared, it is far more striking for the students to feel ‘what it felt like’ to see (and be!) the citizens of *Brave New World* (Huxley 1931/2010), or the sixty-four children in the house in *Méto* (Grevet 2008) who have forgotten the meaning of words because they are so cut off from the world and have no memory of the past:

Well, Claudius? Oh yes, I remember. He’s talking about something he calls “Mummy”. He can’t remember exactly what it looks like. But the word never leaves him. What he is sure of is that there is a connection between this object and bedtime, and also that it is warm and soft. He thinks it might be another way of referring to a pillow or blanket.  
(Grevet 2008, Chapter 3)

In dystopia, imagination and logic go hand in hand but the effect produced on the reader’s reflection would be less effective if it were not accompanied by emotion, produced by the singular peripetia of a character.

Bazin (2019) defines a dystopia as a ‘hermeneutic anamorphosis’ (p. 15): the character and the reader-student are simultaneously led to change their perspective, to modify their initial perception of what they had previously valued. This develops two essential thinking skills in P4C: self-criticism and self-correction. For example, seen through the eyes of Jonas in Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* (*Le Passeur* in French), society is sometimes portrayed positively—help for the elderly, professional trials, sense of responsibility—and sometimes negatively—euthanasia, eugenics, surveillance, loss of free will for instance. The narrative form allows us to experience reversal or contradiction. Here we experience the crisis in a sensitive way, something that classic philosophical texts struggle to do.

Another example of hermeneutic anamorphosis or conversion of perspective is the dystopian novel *Uglies*, by Scott Westerfield, which depicts a world governed by the principle of extreme beauty: Tally Youngblood is still an ‘ugly’ as she is not yet old enough to undergo the operation that will enable her to be physically transformed according to current standards and canons. In the meantime, she envies the ‘pretties’. On the one hand, as a reader, we understand her desire to be accepted, but on the other, we sense the alienating nature of this process.

In *Un Monde pour Clara*, by Jean-Luc Castel, the hermeneutic anamorphosis is blatantly obvious: during a climate demonstration, Diane receives a blow that leaves her in a coma for several years. Meanwhile, society has become an environmentalist dictatorship. Through Diane's character, readers move from enthusiasm to disillusionment.

In dystopias, the values of good and evil are often deliberately divided between those in favour of order and those in favour of revolt and are not set outside the narrative. This encourages the student reader to sharpen his or her judgement and avoid polarisation.

Dystopia calls for a great deal of work on nuance, because it highlights the porous nature of concepts: organisation easily slides into order, authority into authoritarianism, security into surveillance, unity into uniformity, and so on. Secondly, it shows the extent to which concepts cannot be thought of in isolation.

Readers of dystopias are constantly faced with dilemmas: stability at the cost of equality, collective security at the cost of freedom, harmony at the cost of the imaginary ... This zero-sum game is compounded by a narrative construction found in a fairly large number of dystopian novels, such as the choral novel, in which we follow the story from the points of view of different characters. In Johan Heliot's *Ciel L'Hiver des Machines* (2014), for example, the narrative is also tripartite. Events are recounted several times, but by individuals from different social classes. The complexity of the problems presented by the narrative prompt reflection on the issues at stake.

Finally, a particular feature of dystopias for teenagers is that the main characters are themselves teenagers. But, unlike Lipman's approach, it is not so much because the heroes are teenagers that we recommend them to teenagers to learn to philosophise; we think that it is because they are teenage heroes that they are philosophical texts! Indeed, in the dystopian novel for young people, 'adolescence is the condition for the action' of the hero or heroine because 'the adventure could not have happened to adults' (Beauvais 2023, p. 114).

Roberta Seelinger Trites (2000) has theorised the difference between children's literature and literature for adolescents. The former is based on the idea of adherence to learning about the structures of the world, while the latter is based on the repression of the system and confrontation with its structures. Adolescent literature features characters grappling with institutions: school, hospital, prison, family, church,

government, and so on. Moreover, the adolescent psyche, often the theatre of many paradoxes, is the theatre of problems with a strong philosophical content: the desire to belong and conform versus the desire for difference and uniqueness; the conservative position versus the anarchist or revolutionary position; superstition versus scepticism; dogmatism versus relativism. Adolescence, that in-between period when we are not told who we are, when we define ourselves in opposition to the child and the adult, is associated with 'crisis', rebellion and transgression—in short, the ideal breeding ground for philosophy!

### **Dystopia in the classroom**

In this section I reflect on my experience of having taught philosophy workshops during the 2018–2019 French academic year to two classes of final year high school students. The project ran from October to May with the threefold aim of bridging the gap between scholarly and popular literature, giving space to oral expression and other creative activities, and finally building a common culture for the two classes around a corpus of dystopian novels for young people. In both classes, each group (13 in total) was given a small bag at the start of the project containing a dystopian novel, a notebook, a pen, bookmarks, sticky notes and a project sheet. As a final task, they were asked to produce a poster including a summary of the work, the philosophical questions and issues raised by the work, illustrations and an analysis of the role of the child. They also had to invent games based on the dystopian novels they had read.

Initially, the use of dystopian novels for philosophical inquiry was a creative and practical adaptation to the P4C program combined with the requirements of teaching philosophy in high school in France. That is why, at the start of the course, I was more interested in the themes, concepts and problematic issues that the students would come up with when they read the novels.

Many links can be made with classic themes of philosophy and especially with the philosophy syllabus of high school in France (where I teach): art, happiness, conscience, duty, the state, the unconscious, justice, language, freedom, nature, reason, religion, science, technology, time, work, truth. (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale 2019). Science and technology, and freedom are recurring themes, but dystopian novels for young people also do not shy away from tackling themes such as the body, the environment, disability, the relationship with adults. The theme of education and children is also recurrent, as this is how a dystopia is established and its foundations are laid.

In my workshops I at first regarded the novels as pre-texts, simply stimuli, for the community of philosophical inquiry. Over time, the philosophical aspect of its literary characteristics gradually emerged and has since evolved. For example, in a traditional way, after the collective reading of an extract from the dystopian novel *Le Passeur* by Lois Lowry (1994, pp. 123–128), the class collected a list of questions:

- Can freedom be forgotten in the name of society?
- Can people be free and equal at the same time?
- Can we be afraid of being free?
- Should freedom be sacrificed for the good of all?
- Is being equal the same thing as being identical?
- Is a society without conflict desirable?
- Is difference a threat?
- Does knowledge make us free?
- Does knowledge make us superior?
- Is it an advantage to be the only one who knows?
- Can you be right against everyone?
- Can perception be communicated?
- Is knowing something the same as experiencing it?
- Is it possible to know without experience?

I was delighted with these proposals, which were so much richer, more diverse and more creative than the traditional questions on the *baccalauréat* philosophy exam. But it all clicked for me when, during a dialogue on the question voted by the class—*Is a society without conflict desirable?*—that I realised the dialectical power of the dystopian narrative form, particularly in the words of the same pupil at three different moments:

If not, the real answer would be: Well yes, that's desirable, what's needed to move a society forward is precisely for there to be no conflict, for everything to work in some way, if we all agree, that means we're all

going in the same direction, that means society would actually be ... Society's way of living together would be respected, we'd all be OK. (3.29 minutes into the inquiry)

For example the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, I'm speaking for myself, it's not a source of progress, i.e. if they'd agreed from the start, and if they'd all had the same ideas, the same opinions, in the same direction, we'd have avoided decades of conflict, deaths and we'd have two peaceful states that could live, progress, together, towards happiness, whereas now they're at war, for me that's not progress. (5.58 minutes into the inquiry)

After that, you can't really do away with conflict, because, well, I know I've just said the opposite of what I said earlier, but never mind, it still helps us move forward ... If you look at dystopias, for example, we often have a war in a dystopia that has led to a ... For example, I'm thinking of *Divergent* or *The Giver*, where there's an initial conflict that leads to a society that may seem dystopian to us in the sense that we have no freedom of thought, we have to follow precisely the same rules, in other words, we have all the characteristics of a dystopia, but to get out of this dystopia we have a second conflict that then helps to improve society. (18.12 into the inquiry)

In the underlined passages, we can see the evolution of this pupil's thinking, the self-correction and dialectical force provided by the example of dystopias. Through experiences like this, I gradually became aware of the wealth of literary characteristics specific to the dystopian novel and their potential for developing philosophical dispositions and discussion.

Emotions are modes of access to values, to what matters to us (Trappolet 2016). Through the students' rejection of and attraction to the characters' judgements or other students' reactions to the characters' actions, the members of the community of philosophical inquiry revealed their own values, desires and what mattered to them. This made it possible to examine them collectively and to deliberate on what it would be appropriate to feel and do in this situation. For example, there was a very interesting dialogue when we worked from the novel *Starters*, which tells the story of sixteen-year-old Callie, reduced to poverty, who tries to survive on the streets with her little brother by renting out her body to a mysterious scientific institute called the Body Bank. The novel was neither a pretext nor merely a starting point for

philosophising. The opposing emotions—some feeling indignation, others tolerance—sparked and motivated the shared inquiry. It was not just a matter of perspective, but of what moves us from within. What is striking is the extent to which dystopian novels help students to identify the issues at stake in complex situations and to pose problems, which they do because of their emotional engagement with the narrative, and not simply because of the logic in the narrative structure.

Yet, despite the evident philosophical value of dystopian literature, I have observed significant differences among students in their ability to comprehend, interpret, appropriate, and establish connections with the philosophy curriculum. This is why reading must be seen as a skill to be developed, regardless of the nature of the text. It remains to be explored how the community of philosophical inquiry can serve as a space for practicing this skill, in order to cultivate what Nussbaum (2011) calls in the final words of the French version of *Not for Profit*, ‘empathetic and reasonable debate’ (p. 179).

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have chosen to examine the philosophical potential of a literary narrative: dystopian novels for young people. I aim to move away from a deficit and instrumental approach to literature. Based on the assumption that the characteristics and genre of the novel influence the reader’s work, I argue that that dystopian fiction is richer for philosophising than a Lipman and Sharp philosophical novel and, more generally, than texts traditionally identified as philosophical and written by philosophers. The dystopian reading pact helps develop, through its emotional intensity and literarity, a disposition towards self-criticism and self-correction, nuance, pluralism, and sensitivity to the complexity of the world, which contributes to the development of philosophical thought and helps both pupils and teachers make meaning of their experiences. I hope this article sheds light on what constitutes a philosophical reading and goes some way toward the possibility of identifying poetics conducive to developing a reader-philosopher.

(Quotations not originally in English have been translated by the author of this article).

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