

## EN 3353 Major Authors: The Dystopia: the Response to the Idea of Progress

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TTh 3:30 – 4:45

This class offers a thematic summary of dystopias, including three every high school teacher might wish to teach (*1984*, *Brave New World*, and *Fahrenheit 451*). We will work from the thesis that the dystopia is a reaction to the optimism of the Enlightenment, an optimism assaulted, first by the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century, later by the social upheavals of the calamitous 20th century. We will begin with an examination of the Enlightenment notion of Progress, as offered by French philosopher and historian Condorcet. Condorcet died in prison during the French Revolution, killed by instruments of 'progress.' Victorian Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution* and Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* will provide our first inoculation against the Enlightenment dream.

However, Victorians believed in Progress. In the 20th century, as humankind demonstrated fully its capacity to create hells, Progress came under serious attack. Today, in spite of two World Wars, genocide, the mushroom cloud, totalitarian triumphs, and sure evidence that we are destroying the planet, we believe. We believe -- but we question fiercely. We fear the death of the deity Progress, perhaps more than we fear the death of any other god.

Dystopic literature suggests that the god Progress may die -- and offers its postmortems. We will sample civilization's death by nuclear holocaust, totalitarian control, hedonism, religious fundamentalism, and fear of knowledge. The Shute book is an early, deliberately underplayed, account of death by fallout. Orwell and Huxley, of course, are standards. Atwood's book seems almost gentle in the face of Middle East reality, but Atwood's fallen society is our own. We end with the classic on book-burning, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*.



Textbooks:

- Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*. Penguin Classics ISBN-13: 978-0141439600
- Shute, Nevil. *On the Beach*. Vintage 978-0307473998
- Orwell, George. *1984*. Plume 978-0452284234
- Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. Harper Perennial ISBN-13: 978-0060850524
- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Anchor 978-0385490818
- Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451*. Ballantine Books 978-0345342966

\*Yes, that is a concrete Sinclair brontosaurus sitting in an overgrown field in South Dakota.