



‘The figures of “the city” and of “Utopia” have long been intertwined.’¹

Discuss the utopian and/or dystopian aspects of the modern city as it is represented in fictional texts.

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Since the publication of Thomas More’s *Utopia* in 1516 the concept of ‘utopia’ has pervaded the literary form. ‘Utopia’ is both a non-place and a good place and, according to Fatima Viera, ‘one of its most recognizable traits is its speculative discourse on a non-existent social organization which is better than the real society’.² Thus the concept of utopia is inherently intertwined with the idea of progress: progress towards an improved society. Dystopia, which is often viewed as the opposite of utopia, could therefore be seen to be inherently connected to the concept of regression and, indeed, Jean Pfaelzer supports this view, claiming that dystopias portray an ‘historical collapse’ or regression to a previous era.³

High Rise by J.G. Ballard and *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* by Alasdair Gray are examples of dystopian literature and, whilst the cities they depict appear to be modern and technologically advanced, regression is certainly evident too. However, rather than looking at outward signs of regression, such as urban degeneration or a regressive political system, I have decided to take a different approach. Lewis Mumford states that ‘[succumbing] to internal perversities’ can lead to Hell or dystopia⁴ and Andy Merrifield states that it is in the city’s shadows that ‘passions and desires and contradictions reside, get acted out’.⁵ Thus there seems to be a connection between dystopia and the surfacing of internal human behaviours and desires as well. In this essay I will seek to connect this aspect of the dystopian with the aspect of regression. By conducting a psychoanalytic analysis of some of the key behavioural patterns that surface in both books I will show that the characters, by allowing certain desires to surface, regress to a previous era: either a previous historical era — primitive man — or a previous stage of the human life cycle — infancy. Moreover, I will show how this concept of primitive or infantile regression is further highlighted and supported through language choice and imagery in *High Rise* and *Lanark* respectively. I will then argue that this behavioural regression is an internal manifestation of the regression occurring in the cities themselves and thus is used by both authors to symbolize, reflect and reveal that the cities they are depicting are not progressive and utopian, but regressive and dystopian.

¹ David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 156

² Fatima Viera, ‘The Concept of Utopia’, Gregory Claeys, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 7

³ Jean Pfaelzer, ‘Parody and Satire in American Dystopian Fiction of the Nineteenth Century’, *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (March 1980), pp. 61-72 (p.72)

⁴ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1989), p. 113

⁵ Andy Merrifield, ‘The Dialectics of Dystopia: Disorder and Zero Tolerance in The City’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol. 24 (June 2000), pp. 473-89 (p. 480)

According to Freud the human psyche consists of the ego, id and superego. The id represents our base/primal human instincts and desires such as sex, violence and hunger and is the only part of the psyche which exists when we are born. It is only later on in our child development that these instincts are suppressed or controlled by our developing reason (ego) and the cultural rules imposed on us (superego).⁶ In *High Rise*, a novel set in an apartment block described as ‘a small vertical city’,⁷ these base instincts are no longer repressed, however, as the building leaves its residents ‘free to explore any deviant or wayward impulses’ (*HR* p. 36). The residents resort to aggressive, violent and deviant sexual behaviour, physically attacking each other, vandalizing each other’s property, slaughtering animals and raping each other’s women. Thus the residents’ primal instincts govern their actions and their id is therefore no longer suppressed, meaning they have regressed to an infantile state of behaviour, a state where the ego and superego no longer exist.

The residents’ behavioural regression is further highlighted through Ballard’s choice of language. The new social structure which arises in the building is said to be ‘based on small tribal enclaves’ (*HR* p. 70), groups of inhabitants are described as ‘clan members’ (*HR* p. 96) or ‘tribal units’ (*HR* p. 133) and their leaders as ‘clan chiefs’ (*HR* p. 96) or ‘feudal chiefs’ (*HR* p. 132). These terms are often used to describe primitive, pre-civilized society, a society based on instinct and survival which, compared to today, appears undeveloped and regressive. Thus this language evokes the idea that the residents are behaving in a similar way to prehistoric man, and hence have regressed to behaviour from a previous, infantile anthropological age. Furthermore, as the novel develops and the behaviour of the residents deteriorates to an even greater extent, the high-rise is referred to repeatedly as a ‘zoo’ (*HR* p. 134), suggesting that the inhabitants are animals. This highlights even more clearly the residents’ regression from controlled human behaviour to wild, primal, animalistic instincts. Thus Freudian analysis of their behaviour and a linguistic analysis show that the residents of the high rise have regressed to behaviour from a previous era: prehistoric man, infancy, and at the most extreme a pre-evolved animalistic state.

In *Lanark* regression to an infantile state is also evident, most notably through the eponymous protagonist Lanark. The earliest memory that Lanark has is his journey to the city of Unthank:

The sound and the blackness outside the window suggested the train was going through a tunnel. My legs were cramped but I felt very careless and happy. I stood up and walked about and was shocked to see my reflection in the carriage window. My head was big and clumsy with thick hair and eyebrows and an ordinary face, but I could not remember seeing it before.⁸

Elements of this description suggest that Lanark is infantile. His shock at seeing, yet not recognising, his own reflection in the window can be likened to an infant who has not yet progressed through the mirror stage of development, and his big, clumsy head is reminiscent of the disproportionate head to body ratio which is seen in babies. Moreover, Lanark awakes in a cramped position, which could be symbolic of the foetal position babies adopt in the womb, and the tunnel which Lanark is travelling through symbolic of the birth canal. Thus Lanark’s arrival in Unthank is linked to being born, a link which is further reinforced when Lanark arrives with no name, nor memories — something which he has in common with new-born babies.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Ego and the Id’, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 357-80

⁷ JG Ballard, *High Rise* (London: Fourth Estate, 2011), p. 9

Further references to this text will be given in the format ‘HR’ followed by the page number after quotations.

⁸ Alasdair Gray, *Lanark* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011) p. 16

Further references to this text will be given in the format ‘LK’ followed by the page number after quotations.

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The use of this birthing metaphor, then, immediately suggests that Lanark is infantile, and certainly in the novel we see elements of his infantile behaviour. As infants grow older they go through different stages of emotional and social development whereby they learn to express emotions such as joy, fear and embarrassment and build relationships with others.⁹ When Lanark arrives in Unthank, however, he lacks the ability to express emotion or form meaningful relationships. He seems content with his own company and is socially awkward, often separating himself from conversation or embarrassing himself. The one person he makes some connection with is Rima; however, even when they sleep together Rima describes him as being 'as cold as the rest of [them]' (*LK* p. 37) Thus Lanark displays signs of being emotionally and socially undeveloped.

This lack of development is further highlighted through the disease that Lanark contracts. When he arrives in Unthank Lanark notices that he has a 'patch of hard black skin' (*LK* p. 21) on his right elbow and is told that it is dragonhide. As the name suggests, the disease turns human skin into a scaly, dragon-like armour that spreads when it is scratched. An explanation of dragonhide is provided to Lanark when he is in the Institute:

Many people are afraid of the cold and try to keep more heat than they give, they stop the heat from leaving through an organ or limb, and the stopped heat forges the surface into hard insulating armour... Someone may start by limiting only his affections or lust or intelligence, and eventually heart, genitals, brain, hands and skin are crusted over. (*LK* p. 68)

The second half of this explanation seems to suggest that the heat discussed in the first half is a metaphor for human emotion and affection: that people are afraid to express their emotions for fear of a cold, hostile reception and therefore try to retain, limit and internalize them. This internalization manifests itself in a cold, hard armour — dragonhide — which then becomes a metaphor and literalization of the cold, hard, emotionless exterior and front that the sufferers display. Thus dragonhide is a symbolic representation of the inability to express emotion. Julianne Smith supports this view, claiming that those with dragonhide 'are people whose sexuality and affect has come to be so damaged as to make them non-functioning'.¹⁰ Thus the fact that Lanark contracts dragonhide shows that he is unable to express emotion and as a result form meaningful social relationships with others. This inability marks a movement back towards the predevelopment stage of the child, and as a result is a behavioural regression.

Freudian theories of development also shed light on two further types of behaviour: incest in *High Rise* and cannibalism in *Lanark*. Freud believes that children go through five stages of psychosexual development before reaching adulthood and sexual maturity: the Oral, Anal, Phallic, Latent and Genital stages. During the phallic stage, Freud believes children experience an 'Oedipus complex' whereby they develop sexual feelings for the parent of the opposite sex. These feelings can only be resolved through identification with the same-sex parent, and resolution of these feelings is necessary in order to mature.¹¹

In *High Rise* two of the main protagonists display behaviour which suggests they have an oedipal complex. Robert Laing is described as 'always [having] felt physically distanced from [his sister] Alice by her close resemblance to their mother, but for reasons not entirely sexual this resemblance now aroused him. He wanted to touch her hips, place his hand over

⁹ C. A. Brownell and C. B. Kopp, (eds.) *Socioemotional Development in the Toddler Years: Transitions and Transformations* (New York, London: The Guilford Press; 2007)

¹⁰ Julianne, Smith, 'The Unlovely: Disease, Consumption and Sex in Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*', *Honors Projects Overview*. Paper 63, (2012), pp. 19-20

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex* (New York and Washington: Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Company, 1920) [ebook] < <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14969/14969-h/14969-h.htm#p85> > [accessed 10.05.2013]

her breast' (*HR* pp. 98-99). A few pages later, Laing then sets about trying to attract his sister to his apartment hoping that his 'powerful odours were beacons that would draw her to him' (*HR* p. 104). The idea of a smell being used to attract someone here immediately evokes sexual connotations. Thus Laing appears to be sexually attracted to his sister because of a resemblance to his mother, and therefore by deduction must be sexually attracted to his mother too.

A similar mother-son attraction is also evident between Wilder and Helen and Wilder and Mrs Hillman. The reader is told that 'once or twice, in unguarded moments during the early days of [his] marriage [with Helen, Wilder] had attempted to play the childish games he had enjoyed with his mother' (*HR* p. 48). Then when Wilder is having an affair with Mrs Hillman, he is described as 'a wayward child' (*HR* p. 124) and 'mock-son' (*HR* p. 125), whilst she is described as 'an over-anxious mother' (*HR* p. 124) and a 'mock-mother' (*HR* p. 125). Furthermore, the young woman that Wilder meets on the 35th floor towards the end of the novel is said to '[nurse]' him and plans to 'breast-feed him back to a state of childishness' (*HR* p. 160). Thus many of Wilder's sexual partners or encounters in the novel are linked to the mother, suggesting that for him sexual desire and the mother figure are inextricably connected, thus revealing his unresolved oedipal complex.

This sexual attraction to the mother which both Laing and Wilder have displays a behaviour which is characteristic of the phallic stage of development, said to occur when a child is between three and five years of age. By displaying this oedipal desire then, Laing and Wilder regress from sexually mature adult behaviour to childish, infantile behaviour.

In *Lanark*, on the other hand, a different kind of regression is evident. In his essay *Totem and Taboo* Freud put forward the notion that cannibalism was a trait of primitive or pre-civilized societies, claiming that they engaged in this behaviour because 'by absorbing parts of the body of a person through the act of eating we also come to possess the properties which belonged to that person'.¹² This concept is further reiterated when Freud attempts to explain the origins of totemism and states that primitive tribal 'brothers' killed the tribal 'father' and then 'accomplished their identification with him by devouring him and each acquired a part of his strength'.¹³ Thus for Freud cannibalism is not only primitive but a way through which one can acquire the qualities and strengths of another person.

In *Lanark* cannibalism occurs in The Institute, a strange hospital where people go to be cured of their diseases. The food in The Institute appears unrecognisable and unusual to Lanark when he first encounters it, described as 'a lax white meat' and 'completely tasteless' (*LK* p. 50). He later discovers, however, that this food is produced from the bodies of those who have died in the Institute, and therefore that he and everyone else around him have been engaging in a cannibalistic act by eating it. This cannibalism has been interpreted by some critics as an allegorical representation and motif of the capitalist society that we live in, a system that uses others for its own gain;¹⁴ certainly this is one interpretation. Yet there is no doubt that the references made in the novel to the strength and qualities that Lanark gains through cannibalism draw parallels with the Freudian concept of devouring others to literally gain their strength. The food is described as making Lanark feel 'unusually comfortable and alert' (*LK* p. 50), 'relaxed yet capable of powerful action' (*LK* p. 77) and 'stronger [and] more stable' (*LK* p. 89). Thus these parallels suggest that a Freudian interpretation of the cannibalism is also plausible. Since Freud associated cannibalism with primitivism, interpreting it from a Freudian perspective suggests that Lanark and those in the Institute have regressed to the behaviour of primitive and pre-civilized man.

¹² Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: resemblances between the psychic lives of savages and neurotics* (London: Routledge, 1919) p. 136

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 235-36

¹⁴ Neil James Rhind, 'Working Towards a Better Nation: Innovation and Entrapment in the Fiction of Alasdair Gray', *International Review of Scottish Studies* Vol. 36 (2011), pp. 107-128 (p. 114)

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The final behavioural regression that I will look at is 'formal regression', a term coined by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* to describe 'when primitive modes of expression and representation take the place of the customary modes'.¹⁵ Primitive modes in this sense are images and visual representations and customary modes are thought and language. Freud claims that dreams and hallucinations are 'thoughts transformed into images'¹⁶ and therefore are an example of 'formal regression'.¹⁷ Furthermore, Freud claims that thoughts only undergo this transformation when they 'are in intimate connection with suppressed memories, or with memories which have remained unconscious',¹⁸ memories often linked to childhood.

In this way, then, hallucinations and dreams are connected to regression: regression to childhood memories or suppressions and regression to infantile modes of representation. In *Lanark*, books one and two deal with the life of Duncan Thaw, a young artist growing up in post-World War Two Glasgow who gradually descends into madness. This madness comes to fruition in the chapter 'Way Out':

Suddenly words came to him out of the air, whispered by an invisible beak. He became tense, said 'Yes,' walked upright out of the house, shut the door behind him [...] Mrs. Colquhorn's cat sat in the opposite doorway looking at him. Part of her head and throat was missing. [...] The whisperer was a black crow which flew behind his head. In the great silence its orders were very distinct. He was himself that black bird looking down on Duncan Thaw and the streets he walked through (*LK* pp. 346-47).

In this passage, as with many others in the book, elements of the fantastic and peculiar, such as a bird talking and a cat with an exposed brain, are intertwined with ordinary and mundane activities such as leaving the house. Since books one and two are realist, and these peculiar elements do not occur in the real world, one can only assume that Thaw is experiencing hallucinations, perceiving things to be happening and projecting images onto the outside world and thus, according to Freud, displaying signs of regressive and infantile behaviour.

Whilst in *High Rise* hallucinations and dreams do not occur, I believe the concept of 'formal regression' is literalized through the residents' obsession with filming and recording the events that take place in the building. Despite the fact that violence, destruction and sexual aggression are taking place around them and should be considered unusual and abnormal behaviour, nobody seems to talk or think about it; customary modes of expression seem to have fallen by the wayside. Instead, the residents — Wilder in particular — are preoccupied with filming the violence, destruction and sexual aggression. Anne claims that 'Every time someone gets beaten up about ten cameras are shooting away' (*HR* p. 90), residents are described as '[carrying] cameras and flash equipment, ready to record any acts of hostility, any incursions in their territory' (*HR* p. 87) and Wilder wants to 'make a visual record of what had happened within the apartment building' (*HR* pp. 119-20). The residents are eager to transform the events into images and visual representations, and hence are preoccupied with primitive modes of expression. Other references in the novel are also made which further highlight this preoccupation; for example Laing reflects that 'everyone in the high-rise [...] watched television with the sound down' (*HR* p. 30), revealing the residents' rejection of linguistic, audible and customary expression for visual, primitive expression

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1932), p. 505

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.502

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

instead. This replacement of customary expression for primitive expression then becomes a literal manifestation of Freud's formal regression.

To conclude, a psychoanalytic reading of some of the key behavioural patterns which emerge in both *Lanark* and *High Rise* respectively, as well as analysis of language and imagery, reveal that the main protagonists, and indeed the population of Unthank and the high-rise as a whole, regress to the primitive behaviour of a prehistoric age or the infantile behaviour of young children — behaviour such as incest, cannibalism, violence, sexual aggression, hallucinations and emotional immaturity. As I mentioned in my introduction, one dystopian aspect of the modern city is that it regresses; it moves back towards a previous or less developed, infantile state and I would argue that the behavioural regression displayed by the citizens of Unthank, Glasgow and the high-rise is used as a symbolic device by both authors to represent this regression. The regression of behaviour to a primitive and infantile state becomes an internal manifestation and metaphor for the regression of the urban spaces to a more primitive, infantile and hence dystopian state too.

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