

The Loss of Humanity in the Era of Advanced Technology Depicted in Two Dystopian Short Stories: Ken Liu's "The Perfect Match" and Ray Bradbury's "The Veldt"

Dian Windriani¹, Tan Michael Chandra²

¹STKIP PGRI Bandar Lampung, ²Universitas Kristen Krida Wacana

¹dianwindri234@gmail.com, ²michael.chandra@ukrida.ac.id

Abstract: Technology in the digital era creates many opportunities for mankind to make people's life easier. However, the presence of technology creates danger, such as hoaxes, fraud, and data stealing. While at a glance it looks like exaggerated anxiety, unchecked technology will lead to humans without humanity in the near future. With such thought in mind, this paper analyzes two dystopian short stories that focus on how very advanced technology can bring apocalyptic consequences to people's humanity. First, Ken Liu's "The Perfect Match" discusses how technology controls our life in the form of AI that monitors everything we say and do, thus, it eliminates the need for humans to think for themselves as the AI will do such process. Second, Ray Bradbury's "The Veldt" examines the same topic about the marvel of technology in the form of a nursery room, eliminating the need for parents to take care of their children as they are already taken care of by the machine. By employing the qualitative research method, this study concludes that the very advanced technology can be a trigger for the loss of humanity that we know of as both dystopian stories provide the what-if scenario should the growth of technology is left unchecked.

Keywords: *Dystopian Literature, Humanity, Human-Tech Relation*

Abstrak: *Teknologi diciptakan untuk memudahkan kehidupan manusia. Akan tetapi, kehadiran teknologi dapat menyebabkan beberapa macam bahaya, seperti hoax, penipuan, dan pencurian data. Meski sepintas terlihat seperti kecemasan yang berlebihan, teknologi yang tidak terkendali akan mengarah pada manusia tanpa kemanusiaan dalam waktu dekat. Oleh karena itu, makalah ini menganalisis dua cerita pendek distopia yang berfokus pada bagaimana teknologi yang sangat canggih dapat membawa konsekuensi apokaliptik pada rasa kemanusiaan manusia. Pertama, "The Perfect Match" karya Ken Liu membahas tentang bagaimana teknologi mengendalikan hidup manusia dalam bentuk AI yang memantau semua aktivitas manusia. Kedua, "The Veldt" karya Ray Bradbury membahas topik yang sama tentang bagaimana kehadiran mesin dalam bentuk nursery room dapat menggantikan peran orang tua dalam mengasuh anak mereka. Dengan menggunakan*

pendekatan kualitatif dapat disimpulkan bahwa kemajuan teknologi yang sangat pesat dapat menjadi pemicu hilangnya esensi manusia itu sendiri jika kemajuan teknologi dibiarkan begitu saja.

Kata kunci: Sastra Distopia, Kemanusiaan, Human-Tech Relation

INTRODUCTION

Science and technology changed dramatically, from the Stone Age, to the Dark Age, to the Renaissance era, to the industrial revolution, until to the digital era, in which those changes are meant to make human's life easier and more efficient. In spite of that humans cannot blind themselves into the fact that technology can bring catastrophe and misery on them. The advancement of technology which originally aims to help humans doing their activities, however, it forces them to submit to technology. If humans are not aware of it, they will feel alienated and lose the feelings that make them full human beings, namely sense of solidarity, togetherness, sympathy and empathy. Meinita was interested to conduct a study related to *nomophobia* or "No mobile phone phobia". According to *SecureEnvoy* cited by Meinita, in 2012 66 percent of respondents from 1.000 respondents living in England were afraid of losing or living without their cell phones. This percentage was getting higher from the respondents aged 18 until 24 years; 77 percent of respondents in this age group experienced *nomophobia* (Meinita, 2012).

It is true that the development of science and technology makes human's life better and easier. However, one thing that must be reflected on; how the advancement of science and technology massively degrade the essence of human being, such as how technology reduces the personal and intimate relationship between people, the feeling of sympathy and empathy in which those feeling that make them human being. Seeing this case, Janicaud predicted that the effect of such technological advancements could lead human being to surpass their humanity from time to time; what is feared is not being superhuman but inhuman. Janicaud said, "It is inhumanity that constantly lies in wait for the human and it is this figure of the monster, haunting the beauty of every man's and woman's face that we have to return and consider a new" (Janicaud, 2005: 30). From the problem above, one fundamental question should be raised; with the advancement of technology and science today, how will humanity be valued in the future?

Framing through literature, the previous problem has been raised by some authors through dystopian literature. A dystopian literature is characterized by human misery, poverty, violence, disease, pollution, oppressive ruling regime, lack of freedom, and constant surveillance. This worse-case scenario is presented as a form a warning and criticism toward a current trend, social norm, political system, and the impact of science and technology advancement. One of the influential dystopian authors who is

highlighted in this study is Ray Bradbury. He published his first story in 1940 and was soon contributing widely to magazines. Erik Gregersen succinctly explained that Ray Bradbury is well known with his highly imaginative science-fiction short stories and novels which combine social criticism with an awareness of the hazards of runaway technology" (Gregersen, 2022). It can be perfectly seen through his works, such as "There Will Come Soft Rains" (1950), "The Veldt" (1950), "The Pedestrian" (1951), *Fahrenheit 451* (1953; filmed in 1966).

Responding to the problem above, this study examines the loss of humanity in the science and technology advancement reflected in two dystopian short stories, which are Ken Liu's "The Perfect Match" and Ray Bradbury's "The Veldt". First, Ken Liu's "The Perfect Match" discusses how technology control our life in the form of how "AI", virtual assistance, that can monitor everything "SAI" as the main character of the story does, therefore, its' presence later on replace the presence of human being. Second, Ray Bradbury's "The Veldt" examines the same topic about the marvel of technology in the form of smart house and nursery. This house which is controlled by machine in the end eliminates the need of parents to take care of their children. Therefore, it can be said that how the advanced technology can dominate and trigger the loss of humanity if the growth of technology is left unchecked.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Dystopian literature started to emerge in 20th century as a response to political, economic and cultural problem, for example Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *1984* (1949), and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). According to Spisak, dystopia is a future world that extends and distorts modern day issues into a dehumanized state in which controls have been forced upon society and its inhabitants through social and physical limitations that restrict many aspects of life (Spisak, 2012). Adam succinctly explained that the root of the word dystopia is in coming from Ancient Greece's "dys" and "topia" which means "bad" and "place"; dystopia then can be literary defined as "Bad Place". However, the connotative of it is much darker and includes multiple facets.

Mostly, people define dystopia in relation to utopia. The world utopia represents the idea of a perfect world to grow up. This world looks unrealistic since in this world people live happily ever after and impossible for them to experience a prejudice or discrimination. In contrast, dystopia refers to the world which is imperfect; in this case it destroys all hope for the better one. According to Bethune, dystopian citizens have to experience with "harshly repressive societies" that restrict any free thought or individuality (Bethune,

2012). In this system, individual freedom is limited, the information is controlled by the dictator, humanity is destroyed, and the citizens are treated like machine. Responding to this matter, Whissen explained,

“overall paralysis of any aesthetic sense...everything is machine products, mass-produced, and sterile, and as a consequence, civilization has lost touch with the qualities that once gave life zest, qualities of passion and vitality, of irrationality and excess that were both its peril and its promise” (Whissen, 1992).

However, Prakash, et.al, argued that dystopia is actually the extension of utopia. He further explained that dystopia is the failure of utopia that leads to the dark and miserable life. “Despite the name, dystopia is not simply the opposite of utopia. A true opposite of utopia would be a society that is either completely unplanned or is planned to be deliberately terrifying and awful. Dystopia, typically invoked, is neither of these things; rather, it is a utopia that has gone wrong or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society” (Prakash, et.al, 2010: 1).

Humans no longer trust one another, instead turn against one another, until to the extend they lose their humanity. The purpose of dystopian writing is to remind readers of the value of empathy, sympathy, and the inherent goodness of people that cannot be replaced by anything, not even the advanced science and technology.

METHOD

This study employs close reading analysis. This analysis aims to discern some deeper meaning presented in the texts studied, it therefore focuses on the specific details of the texts, such as plot, character, setting, symbol, and other intrinsic elements. The primary sources are Ken Liu's “The Perfect Match” and Ray Bradbury's “The Veldt”. Bradbury's “The Veldt” was firstly published in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1950 with the title *The World the Children Made*. It was then republished 1951 in the anthology *The Illustrated Man* using current the title which is “The Veldt.” Ken Liu's “Perfect Match” was published in the online archives of *Lightspeed Magazine* by Ken Liu in 2012. The secondary sources are taken from academic journals, theories, book, and other relevant information. Since this study tries to examine how the advanced technology brought in the two stories can dominate and trigger the loss of humanity, therefore, this study employs three steps in interpreting the data; describing, analyzing, and deriving a conclusion. First, this study describes the connection between the loss of humanity and the advancement of technology depicted in the short stories studied. Second, this study analyses the works studied under the framework of dystopian literature. Third, this study

concludes about the loss of humanity by comparing two different stories under the framework of dystopian literature.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Tilly: Supreme AI that Helps Human in “The Perfect Match”

“The Perfect Match” sets in the world where almost everyone willingly surrenders their personal data to company called *Centillion* and social media called *ShareAll*. In return they get a very sophisticated AI called Tilly who inhabits their smart phone, smart watch, earpieces, home sensor, basically every gadget that they have. Although it seems that Tilly is only one AI, Tilly has tailored herself to be suitable for every *Centillion* user based on the data of the user, becoming a custom AI for every person. Tilly tracks all of our life, getting our favourite food, music, movie, and other things by reading our search history algorithm. Via wearable health devices used by user, Tilly can also detect the emotion of the user and then suggest some activity and/or food to eat that can compensate such condition, can be seen in this following excerpt.

“I sense a lot of aggression in you. How about some kickboxing? You haven’t gone in a while, and there’s a 24-hour gym coming up. Take a right here.”

“I don’t feel like spending more money.”

“You know I have a coupon.” (Liu, 2012)

This shows how Tilly not only detects a lot of aggression from Sai, her owner, but she also suggests kickboxing to relieve that aggression. Tilly does not stop at that, but also shows her owner the direction to the gym that provides kickboxing facility as well as provide coupon for discount. As an AI with whole and holistic understanding of his owner, Tilly makes sure the owner can function properly as their activity demands, as:

Sai woke to the rousing first movement of Vivaldi’s violin concerto in C minor, “Il Sospetto.”

Which is what he did next. “Tilly, that’s an inspired choice for a wake-up song.”

“Of course,” Tilly spoke from the camera/speaker in the nightstand. “Who knows your tastes and moods better than I?” The voice, though electronic, was affectionate and playful (Liu, 2012).

By detecting Sai’s sleeping pattern and match it with his daily activity, Tilly makes sure that her owner wakes up fresh and ready to be briefed for the activity Sai need to do today by waking him up with the chosen wake-up song which, of course, decided based on Sai’s favourite songs. After the wake up routine, Tilly gives head-up to Sai about today’s job

“You are scheduled to attend the kick-off meeting for the Davis case at eleven, which means you’ll get a lunch paid for by the firm. I suggest you go light on the breakfast, maybe just a banana” (Liu, 2012)

Seeing these excerpts, it can be seen that in "The Perfect World" AI has become much more sophisticated in its role to ultimately help human life. Human can no longer worry if they miss and/or forget their work schedule as well as their health and entertainment. Tilly makes sure that every human connected to her will have a very personal assistance that cater to every professional and personal needs of its owner, treating them perfectly with utmost care. Therefore, human in this world can basically use Tilly to be ease with their life

Sophisticated House Technology with Enigmatic Nursery of "The Veldt"

Similar with the situation in the aforementioned short story "The Perfect Match," "The Veldt" also sets in the world that have advanced technology albeit the short story only showcases this via the description of the house and particularly the nursery, the latter becoming the main concern of the parents in the story. It is inferred that George and Lydia Hadley work really hard and save so much in order to have a technological advanced house that they have now so that they can have both luxurious and relaxing life. They succeeded in do so as the excerpts said,

They walked down the hall of their HappyLife Home, which had cost them thirty thousand dollars with everything included. This house which clothed and fed and rocked them to sleep and played and sang and was good to them. Their approach was sensed by a hidden switch and the nursery light turned on when they came within ten feet of it. Similarly, behind them, in the halls, lights went on and off automatically as they left them behind (Bradbury, 1950).

The excerpts clearly show on how Hadley family has expensive "automatic house" that done all the housework for them and thus eliminating the need for them to do anything. They automatic house performs almost anything ranging from feeding, clothing, and even trivial action such as fetch Geory a ketchup. The star of the show, however, is the nursery or the place that they use to take care of the children. The house nursery is a room that provides a virtual reality for the children, Peter and Wendy, so that they can experience any story that they want. It is stated that

How many times in the last year had he opened this door and found Wonderland with Alice and the Mock Turtle, or Aladdin and his Magical Lamp, or Jack Pumpkin head of Oz, or Dr. Doolittle, or the cow jumping over a very real-looking moon. All the most enjoyable creations of an imaginary world. How often had he seen Pegasus the winged horse flying in the sky ceiling, or seen explosions of red fireworks, or heard beautiful singing (Bradbury, 1950).

Any world and atmosphere that Peter and Wendy want to experience will be shown by the nursery and the limit of the nursery is only as limited as the children's imagination. As long as the children imagination keeps flowing,

so does the nursery will show. The nursery provides a safe place for Peter and Wendy to play and be imaginative while in the same time creates a free time for George and Lydia to relax and not bothering with taking care of the children anymore. Therefore, the technology creates win-win solution both for the parents and the children to relax and living their life to the fullest without the need to think about anything else as the house already got everything covered.

How Advanced Technology Resulted in the Loss of Humanity in Both Stories

While technology indeed creates a very comfortable life for the human living in both “The Perfect Match” and “The Veldt” worlds, it does not come without a cost to pay. In order to have such a lifestyle, there are some things that need to be sacrificed by the characters. In “The Perfect Match” for instance, in order to have Tilly fully functioned without any error in helping her human master, the user must surrender their own data willingly to the *Centillion*, company that creates Tilly. This means all private data such as identity, search history, routine, health condition, all related to our physical and mental state will be known by Tilly and thus by extension is the company. The user also needs to place Tilly in their home with home gadget and carry Tilly anywhere via mobile gadget so that Tilly can always track the user in order to give perfect suggestion within her algorithm. The first loss of humanity that happens in this case is the loss of privacy any user might have as Tilly monitors every moment of our life. While Sai, the main character, try to shut Tilly off for just one night, this conversation happens

“Tilly, I just want to go home and sleep. Can you shut yourself off for the rest of the night?”

“You know that in order to make the best life recommendations, I need to have complete knowledge of you. If you shut me out of parts of your life, my recommendations won’t be as accurate—”

Sai reached into his pocket and turned off the phone. The earpiece went silent (Bradbury, 1950).

Tilly refuses to be turned off as she explains that by turning her off, it would create a gap within her algorithms that makes her suggestion to Sai’s life won’t be as accurate as usual. Sai, however, still turns her off although not without experiencing problem with how people perceive him.

As most of the people in Sai’s society uses Tilly on daily bases, Tilly existence is seen as very normal things to do and a person without Tilly are seen as strange, old-school, and backward. Turning off Tilly even just one time, like Sai did, is also seen as strange things to do by society. This fact creates the second loss of humanity: the loss of human capacity to think by themselves. Human has been using Tilly so much for everything in their daily life ranging from checking work schedule, buying things, waking them up, and so on that

human cannot think by themselves regarding of those things as Tilly already done the thinking process for them. Even a very personal thing such as dating is set up by Tilly,

After work, Tilly guided Sai to the flower shop—of course Tilly had a coupon—and then, on the way to the restaurant, she filled Sai in on his date, Ellen: educational background, ShareAll profile, reviews by previous boyfriends/girlfriends, interests, likes, dislikes, and of course, pictures—dozens of photos recognized and gathered by Tilly from around the Net. Sai smiled. As usual (Bradbury, 1950).

It is clear from this quotation that even in looking for potential life partner, people do not have to think, and they just let Tilly decide to find the perfect partner for them. Not stopping at that, what happen next is

In that moment, Tilly's voice burst into his earpiece, "You might want to ask her if she likes contemporary Japanese desserts. I know just the place." (Liu, 2012)

Therefore, not only Tilly decides on the couple to date each other, but she is also deciding the topic of the conversation and where two of them should go. The dating activities who should be a private matter between two people change into matchmaking between two profiles with the same algorithm for Tilly, and Sai finally realize this: *Tilly doesn't just tell you what you want. She tells you what to think* (Liu, 2012). Over dependence on AI creates a dystopian society where human in "The Perfect Match" unable to think for themselves as all of the thinking process has been replaced by AI. All in all, loss of privacy and loss of human capacity to think are the two evidences of the loss of humanity due to the advanced of technology.

Moving to Ray Bradburry "The Veldt," the sophisticated and advanced technology of the house, particularly the nursery, are indeed make Hadley family live comfortably. However, similar with what happened in "The Perfect Match," the comfort gotten from the technology comes from the sacrifice of some humanity, in this case: the parent-children relationship. The nursery, the room with advanced technology who takes care of Peter and Wendy instead of their parent George and Lydia, has become the true parent of the children instead of their biological parents. As the children spend most of their time there since they were small, they grow an attachment to the room and not to their biological-living human parents. Added by the fact that the house takes care of all the house need including taking care of the children need, the classic-personal relationship between parents and children is simply not there anymore as all has been replaced by advanced technology. George and Lydia slowly aware of this and yet it is too late to change, as Lydia notes that

"That's just it. I feel like I don't belong here. The house is wife and mother now, and nurse for the children. Can I compete with an African veldt? Can I give a bath and clean the children as efficiently or quickly as the automatic body wash can? I cannot. And it isn't just me. It's you.

You've been awfully nervous lately." "I suppose I have been smoking too much." "You look as if you didn't know what to do with yourself in this house, either. You smoke a little more every morning and drink a little more every afternoon, and you are taking more pills to help you sleep at night. You're beginning to feel unnecessary too" (Bradbury, 1950).

Lydia is aware that their house, with all of its advanced technology and nursery, has completely replaced their role as the parents of the children. The fact that the house does everything perfectly is further adding the fact how incompetent and unnecessary their roles in the house are. The machine simply does everything better than them, including raising their own children. Bitter fact that it creates stressful situation for George and Lydia that lead them smoke, drink, and take pills to alleviate their mental burden. In conclusion, similar with "The Perfect Match," "The Veldt" shows how advanced technology can result in the loss of humanity, the loss of personal relationship between parents and children in this case.

The Loss of Humanity in the Era of Advanced Technology: Not a Far-Fetched Dystopian Scenario

Dystopian literature often depicts a negative view of "the way the world is supposedly going in order to provide urgent propaganda for a change in direction" (Stableford, 1993, pp. 360-362) and thus "provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable" (Booker, 1994). Therefore, dystopian literature is usually written in order to give hypothetical scenario for the readers of what happen if something, the rise of technology in this case, is left unchecked and taken for granted. By reading such literary works, it is hoped that the reader will put more care into the topic and thus can avoid the hypothetical scenario written in the literary works to happen in their real life. As many dystopian literatures usually use far-fetched and advance scenario that won't happen in reality for at least decades, some pragmatics and pessimistic readers can simply brush it off by saying that such things won't happen at least in their life time. However, the case written in this paper is rather different as some of the dystopian scenario about the loss of humanity due to advanced technology is actually already happened now.

While having all-seeing, all-controlling, and perfect AI such as Tilly seems implausible for now, the prototype of Tilly already exists in the form AI assistant created by IT Giants: Google has Google Assistant, Apple has Siri, Amazon has Alexa, and Microsoft has Cortana. Those entire assistant works well by reading the data that user willingly gave to them in order to create unique algorithms for each user. Almost all of them also have their "home" version device that can turn your home into "smart home" by having

control of your appliances. While those AI seems unreliable in the time of their making, they are starting to get better and better each year. While the loss of human capacity to think sounds exaggerating and far-fetch for now, we should remember that nowadays a program that help us think also start to get better. The existence of auto-spelling and auto grammar-check program, for instance, while helping us can also be double edged swords in the way that we don't need to remember word spelling and word grammar anymore as the program already done that. While the nursery in "The Veldt" that takes care of our children via virtual reality is perhaps still not exist in today's time, the fact that some parents use phone/tablet screen to keep their children occupied cannot be denied, thus indirectly has the same function as the nursery itself: children raised by technology. Therefore, the dystopian scenario of advanced technology in "The Perfect Match" and "The Veldt" cannot be said to be still far away as it is already happened. What people can do now is to make sure that the technology that we have now does not make us lose our humanity, like what happened in both stories.

CONCLUSION

Dystopian literature often provides a warning in the form of hypothetical scenario of what would happen in the future should we ignore a clear sign that can doom humanity. The same can be said for both dystopian short stories "The Perfect Match" by Ken Liu and "The Veldt" by Ray Bradburry in their spirit of reminding us the danger of advanced technology that can result in the loss of our humanity. After analyzing both stories, it can be concluded that the advanced technology in the form of advanced AI in the "Perfect Match" and advanced house in "The Veldt" can definitely make us loss our humanity in three ways: loss of privacy, loss of human capacity to think, and loss of relationship between humans. Additionally, due to the fact that the scenario of advanced technology depicted in both short stories is currently happening in our world right now, it will be wise for us to reconsider our use of technology so that the loss of humanity depicted in the stories won't happen anytime soon.

REFERENCES

- Bethune, B. (2012). *Dystopia Now: A Frightening Story about Kids Killing Other Kids for the Amusement of Adults Has Become a Blockbuster*. Retrieved October 25, 2022, from Maclean's: <https://archive.macleans.ca/article/2012/4/9/dystopia-now>
- Booker, K. M. (1994). *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

- Bradbury, R. (1950). *The Veldt*. *The Saturday Evening Post*. Gothic Digital Series @UFSC. Retrieved October 28, 2022, from <https://repositorio.ufsc.br/bitstream/handle/123456789/163728/The%20Veldt%20-%20Ray%20Bradbury.pdf>
- Gregersen, E. (2022). *Ray Bradbury*. Retrieved from Britannica Online: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ray-Bradbury>
- Gordin, M., Tilley, H. & Prakash, G. (2010). Introduction. Utopia and Dystopia beyond Space and Time. In M. Gordin, H. Tilley & G. Prakash (Ed.), *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility* (pp. 1-18). Princeton: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400834952.1>
- Janicaud, D. (2005). *On the Human Condition*. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203390788>
- Liu, K. (2012). The Perfect Match. *Lightspeed Science Fiction and Fantasy*, 31. (J. J. Adams, Ed.) Retrieved October 25, 2022, from <https://www.lightspeedmagazine.com/fiction/the-perfect-match/>
- Meinita, H. (2012). *Mahasiswa Tak Bisa Hidup Tanpa Smartphone*. Retrieved from Okezone: <https://news.okezone.com/read/2012/03/26/373/599857/mahasiswa-tak-bisa-hidup-tanpa-smartphone>
- Spisak, A. (2012). *What Makes a Good YA Dystopian Novel?* Retrieved October 25, 2022, from The Horn Book Inc: <https://www.hbook.com/story/what-makes-a-good-ya-dystopian-novel>
- Stableford, B. (1993). Dystopias. In J. Clute, & P. Nicholls (Eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (2nd ed., pp. 360–362). London: Orbit.
- Wissen, T. R. (1992). *Classic Cult Fiction: A Companion to Popular Cult Literature*. New York: Greenwood Press.