NEW LITERARIA-
An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities
Volume 7, No. 2, January-February, 2026, PP. 43-50
ISSN: 2582-7375
DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.48189/nl.2026.v07i2.006
www.newliteraria.com

Subverted Ethics in an Automated Future: Dystopian Crisis of Human Agency and Familial Disintegration in *The Veldt* and *Ten with a Flag*

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Abstract

Speculative fiction gets its name from imagining a future shaped by technological progress. However, instead of assisting humanity, technology has often led to authoritarian rule and moral decay. This paper analyses Ray Bradbury's *The Veldt* (1950) and Joseph Paul Haines's *Ten with a Flag* (2006) to delve deeper into how automation can subvert socially accepted ethical and moral standards. Both stories undermine a dystopian crisis where technology becomes a living entity by itself, gradually eroding individual autonomy and reconfiguring the family and social order. In *The Veldt*, Bradbury examines moral collapse through the disintegration of family values, where domestic automation renders adults helpless and empowers children through technological excess. Haines's *Ten with a Flag* extrapolates technological advancement into a near-future where the state's algorithmic social ranking reduces humans to statistical data. It presents a scenario legitimised by implementing eugenic regulation and control in the name of national quality control. These stories together highlight a continuous thread of concerns about overpowering technological advancement, where the human race involuntarily transfers the reins of moral and ethical codes of society into the hands of technology. The paper argues that these dystopian visions not only explore contemporary debates on artificial intelligence, surveillance, and bioethics but also highlight the dangers of entrusting moral judgment to mechanical systems that lack human empathy. By placing these texts within the contexts of dystopian literary criticism, the paper demonstrates how speculative fiction issues a warning not only about future possibilities but also about how the seeds are being sown in the present. Ultimately, the analysis underscores how the dystopian genre, combined with some hard-hitting speculative fiction, serves as a warning of the worst possible scenarios for testing the fragile boundary between human agency and machine governance, urging us to reinstate ethical responsibility in an era of accelerating automation.

Keywords: Speculative Fiction, Dystopia, Automation, Technology, Authoritarian, Ethical, Moral.

Article History: Received: 26 Nov 2025. Revised: 05 December 2025. Accepted: 27 December 2025. First published: 01st February, 2026.

Published by: Adrija Press, India.

Citation: Banerjee, Ushita. (2026). Subverted Ethics in an Automated Future: Dystopian Crisis of Human Agency and Familial Disintegration in *The Veldt* and *Ten with a Flag*. *New Literaria-An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 7:2, 43-50. https://dx.doi.org/10.48189/nl.2026.v07i2.006

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Introduction: A Crisis of Civilization

"What makes a monster and what makes a man?" - Alan Menken. (Menken & Rice, 2017)

Just as man and monster often become interchangeable, like alternative reflections in a mirror, the ambiguity of utopia and dystopia has captivated generations of literary minds. While Sir Thomas More came up with the idea of an 'ideal' world with everything in perfect order when he conceptualized 'utopia,' a deeper reflection on the etymological origin tells us it literally meant 'no place' (utopia, n.d.). Considering that a 'perfect place' is an impossibility, the question that immediately follows is whether the dystopia (Dystopias: Definition and Characteristics, 2006), as the 'imperfect world', is also a reality. As depicted in popular dystopian literature, the portrayal of an anarchical society opens the door to aspects of present-day life extrapolated into a dystopian future. The design and development of dystopia opens up a world with an actual aspect of lived experience by working backwards from the dystopian setting and comes to realise that all dystopian speculative fictions are cautionary tales, not set in the future, but here and now.

Coming to the integral connection between dystopia and anarchy, researchers believe, "Anarchism is the theory that proposes abolishing any kind of hierarchical or authoritarian structures, especially the state. It is derived from the Greek word *anarkos,* meaning "without a chief." In the colloquial sense, "anarchy" tends to refer to political chaos, but this is not what most anarchists seek. Rather, anarchists believe that one can have rules without rulers, laws without lawmakers, and authority without hierarchy." (Buckley, n.d.). This particular aspect of dystopia operates at multiple levels – not only in society as the macrocosm, but also in the family as a microcosmic representation of society itself. Often anchored in the genre of speculative fiction, a dystopian future world is frequently "characterized by bleakness, desolation, misery and despair, by recounting the appalling accounts of apocalypse or post-apocalypse caused by the dominant human affairs." (Majhi, 2023). As seen in many popular dystopian fictions, a post-apocalyptic world can take many forms. In the seminal dystopian work *1984* by George Orwell, the onset of the novel prepares readers for an immersion in a setting that reeks of *"boiled cabbage and old rag mats,"* where *"the eyes follow you about when you move"* and people are intimidated by the big bold letters of *"BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU,"* (Orwell, 1949) thereby preparing them for a post-apocalyptic world that is bleak inside out.

In contrast, Kathy's description of the Recovery Centre in *Never Let Me Go* offers apparent positive vibes, "it's one of my favourites, and I wouldn't mind at all if that's where I ended up. The recovery rooms are small, but they're well-designed and comfortable. Everything–the walls, the floor–has been done in gleaming white tiles, which the centre keeps so clean when you first go in, it's almost like entering a hall of mirrors." (Ishiguro, 2005). However, as is true of most dystopian realities, there's an impending doom that ultimately forces the characters to either succumb to or rise above the system.

Here, the system that brings them to a 'make or break' situation is an integral part of this anarchy. As the idea of anarchy unfolds, "It posits that the highest ideals of civilized life are, in fact, mere masks for oppression. To the anarchist, family life, patriotism, and faith are all pretenses for tyranny." (Buckley, n.d.). Going with this premise, the idea of subverted ethics in *The Veldt* and *Ten with a Flag* leads to an exploration that brings forth the familial betrayal through an involuntary transfer of parental power on to mechanical intelligence and eugenic regulations ruthless breaking familial bonds for a social quality control come as a warning of what might await the human kind, riding on the hedonic wave of scientific and technical innovation.

Automation and Destabilization of Ethical Codes

Coined by John Stuart Mill, 'dystopia' offers two parts – 'dys' (bad) and 'utopia' (perfect world), in course emanating the idea of a 'bad place.' But, considering 'utopia' as 'no place', the question that springs up is whether this 'bad place' is at all existent. The primary premises of this argument stem from a human perspective, determining a world and its essential characteristics from a personal, individual standpoint. In essence, utopia is only a concept that actualizes through the expectations and manifestations of people in different ways and contexts. As defined by Barnita Bagchi, "Utopia is a resonance, a mode, a perspective," and thereby "speculative and difficult or impossible to actualize in reality." (Bagchi, 2012). The subjective nature of utopia and even dystopia makes it a more elusive reality, in which the ethical framework of a society becomes more an internal conditioning than an external implementation. As viewed by researchers, "Generally, one can identify a dystopia as being ruled by ideological radicalism where the rulers build the society on a struggle for utopia." (Dündar, 2013). This further leads us to view dystopia from a utopian lens, where the basic inception was grounded in making things perfect, which gradually took a radical turn from idealism to oppression. For example, Aldous Huxley blurs this thin line in *A Brave New World,* where the conceptualization of a 'new world' is seeded in a utopian vision and transformed into an automated dystopia. With the scientific urge to create a controlled environment with electric shock and the thought process altered by authoritarian control, the world in making becomes a place for normalizing the unexpected.

Hence, the question leads to exploring how automation and authoritarian control destabilize ethical codes and human agency in a dystopian society. Ethics, with the emergence of posthumanism concepts, has undergone a massive shift, following the "deconstruction of our radical conception of '*human*'", and in the process, "it further shifts our societal value alignment system to a novel dimension." (Nath, 2023). The moral codes that bind the ethical framework have thereby loosened up in more ways than one. A world where reality gets replaced by 'virtual reality' and human intelligence voluntarily submits to 'artificial intelligence,' the defining emotional quotient is bound to shatter. What starts as destabilization of accepted frameworks might experience a total collapse at one point in time, and that becomes the core of the dystopian genre. A close study of the two short stories, *The Veldt* by Ray Bradbury and *Ten with a Flag* by Joseph Paul Haines undermines a crisis where technology becomes an entity by itself, challenging human agency. The former is a classic example of the ethical disintegration of family values under the influence of digital addiction, while the latter illustrates the disintegration of the family itself under authoritarian technocracy, assuming the role of a dystopian figurehead.

As mentioned before, dystopian fiction is usually set in a distant future and thus the mnemonic 'speculative fiction,' as it speculates 'what could be.' The undercurrent of threat that it carries comes from the fact that these possibilities are usually the extrapolated extension of 'what already is there.' With digitization rapidly taking over human actions and interactions, the Panopticism theory becomes increasingly relevant with the involuntary incarceration of human beings within the frame of the screen. The physical structure of Jeremy Bentham's 'panopticon' was a circular building with cells built around it for prisoners. The Panopticism theory thus looks at the prisoner as "He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (Foucault, 1995). Moving from a physical prison to a technological surveillance system is just a transition from concrete to abstract. From a virtual jungle to an unseen figurehead, these two stories record a complete collapse of bioethics within a familial and social framework that is not far away from the way the newer generations are being shaped through a 'simulation' of reality rather than reality itself.

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2. Case Studies
2.1: The Veldt, The Perils of the 'Happylife Home'

The 'Happylife Home' is a much-coveted 'smart' house that George Hadley and his wife invested in, paying a fortune. The nursery within the house came with huge dimensions and a hefty cost, which they willingly paid, thinking, "nothing's too good for our children" (Bradbury, 1950). The irony begins to unfold when Hadley's overwhelming sense of wonder at the technological marvel, creating an interactive nursery with real-life simulation, leads to digital addiction in his children. This addiction gradually progresses to a level of voluntary jettison of all ethical boundaries, including loyalty and love towards their parents. That this virtual reality turns into a living reality, where "an automated artificial system could replace the human brain and repair any physical loss of our biological body." (Nath, 2023) The story evokes horror with a sense of doom, where all systemic bindings loosen. Ethics are not only abandoned here, but reduced to nonexistence. As observed by Dündar, a dystopian world is immersed in "future technology" and "is progressing at an alarming rate, thereby marking a complete subversion of "our morals and ethics" that "are based on old beliefs that do nothing to regulate and guide us today." (Dündar, 2013). That the children of George and Lydia Hudley "live for the nursery" becomes the deathly debacle waiting to lurk on the unsuspecting parents. The nursery becomes increasingly vivid and detailed, keeping up with the visualization and imagination of the children, following their expanding knowledge base of the African Veldt. What starts as a harmless entertainment spree soon turns into an obsession. Two parallel forces come into play to lead towards the climax – the children's unflinching loyalty to the visual simulation of the nursery and a much-fated distancing from the parents.

The undercurrent of these opposing forces almost works like a tide, sweeping away all sense of social norms and moral bindings. George's reasoning for buying this house was "so we wouldn't have to do anything." (Bradbury, 1950) becomes a hard fact when they lose their power of decision-making and are rendered powerless and remain at the mercy of the 'smart technology' of the house at work. It is Lydia, the mother, who first starts feeling uncomfortable with the functioning of the house, and her most significant point of discomfort comes from the fact that she loses her agency, and her human capacity fails to keep up with technological efficiency. "That's just it. I feel like I don't belong here. The housewife and mother is now also a nursemaid. Can I compete with an African veldt? Can I give a bath and scrub the children as efficiently or quickly as the automatic scrub bath can? I cannot. And it isn't just me. It's you. You've been awfully nervous lately." (Bradbury, 1950). As the story approaches a point of conclusion, with the parents determined to wean the children off this addiction, a sense of doom also looms large. It is a breaking point in familial bonds and loyalty where the parents have to pay the price for trying to part the children from their nursery.

The house, assuming the role of wife and mother, is an alarming entity, not restricted to Happylife Home alone. Examining the social landscape, particularly in the post-COVID era, technology is no longer a human-made phenomenon. It is omnipresent and gradually turns into an authoritarian figure that slips into human lives unassumingly and takes over total control before one even realizes. The very ability to turn thoughts and imagination into a sensory representation speaks of thought-control, almost as a distant echo of the 'thought-police' in *1984* (Orwell, 1949). At this point, 'tech-consumerism,' as observed by Ganguly (Ganguly, 2023), is not restricted to subverting the accepted ethical framework but defies the regular human functions altogether. In the course, the structural social units start disintegrating in the absence of day-to-day connections that bind them. In *The Veldt*, the mother starts feeling awkward ahead of the father, who fails to recognize and acknowledge this shift until it's too

late. 'Tech consumerism' is extrapolated to an extent in this story, where, for Wendy and Peter, technology is not an aid but a necessity (Ganguly, 2023). The way they alter their imagination to sacrifice and punish their parents by feeding them to the hungry lions of the African Veldt and stay loyal to their own 'tech-hub nursery' reflects the loss of parental bonding and the disregard for kinship. In today's world, the post-COVID era has normalized digitization to an extent never imagined before. This vast automation, along with the advent of generative AI, often reaches an extent where artificial intelligence paralyzes human intelligence, stripping it of its value systems and reasoning altogether. *The Veldt* brings about a moral collapse through the disintegration of family values, where domestic automation reverses the roles of parents and children through technological excess and a compulsive collapse of all familial bonds.

2.2: Ten with a Flag, Algorithmic Eugenics and the State

'Perfection with a flaw' would be the closest to describe the irony in *Ten with a Flag*. Raising questions about bioethics and eugenic regulations to control algorithmic social standards, the story underpins a morbid picture of dystopian authoritarianism. "Are we all going to be working for a smart machine, or will we have smart people around the machine?" – Zuboff recalls someone asking this question in her business model analysis research to see how, through the gathering of personal information and preferences, a digital totalitarian control is coming to power (Zuboff, 2019). Her analysis model explores how 'machine intelligence' utilizes algorithms to predict patterns of consumerism. The same model is seen in Haine's short story *Ten with a Flag*, which presents a scenario legitimised by implementing eugenic regulation and control in the name of national quality control. Before a child is born, the state assigns a rating to the unborn and performs a possible risk analysis of the family based on the rating score. On a scale of one to ten, an unborn is rated by its algorithmic potential. Johnnie and his wife get a social promotion based on the child's prediction who has been rated a perfect ten. The only question mark in the rating is a flag, which makes perfection flawed. Since the wife is the mother and must give birth to such a perfect child, the promotion applies to her, while Johnnie is demoted and, in the process, separated from his family. The repeated questions that Johnnie asks naturally pose a threat to the state system, and his ultimate elimination reveals that he was the 'flag' that a 'ten-rating' child had. His question, "But perfect for who?" is not in line with complete allegiance to the state (Haines, 2010). The big question that looms large is: in this 'smart' world of technology, are human beings transferring the reins of control into the hands of technology and finally suspending their basic human agency? Johnnie's elimination from the family symbolizes a fated loss of human agency under the totalitarian control of technology.

Making a society 'perfect' can be considered an idealistic vision of social quality control. However, the same question around 'perfection' and what good it serves remains a careful consideration in the context of dystopia. Just as light hides darkness, a dystopian society might emerge from the urge to establish a utopian set-up (KnowledgeHusk, 2017). The rise of neoliberalism indicates that society leads up to a "structure with formal properties" that often acts as "a cover for a generalized administrative intervention by the state " (Shapiro, 2019). From the fear of the state becoming 'sedentary and submissive' under leniency stems the concept of control where it becomes an 'active State,' and amplifies 'state violence' to "mechanisms and procedures intended to conduct [wo]men, to drive their conduct, to conduct their conduct" (Foucault, On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979– 1980, 2014). The 'Central' in *Ten with a Flag* is a classic example where human thoughts and conduct are regulated, apparently for the good of society, to an extent, where staying within the rights of parental decisions labels Johnnie as a 'traitor', and he needs to be removed from the mother, who is expecting a 'perfect' child. Interestingly, the child also gets labelled before it's even born. Besides being scored a 'ten,' he earns the virtue of uncovering

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'one traitor to the State' and is destined to be groomed to join the Human Services (Haines, 2010). The ironic edge of this lies in the role of the 'Human Services" – is it for human good or for human mind control? In the animal world, human beings are considered the apex for their advanced cognitive abilities. When a totalitarian system takes over this cognitive power, man generally degrades, slipping from this status. As human agency faces a complete crash, familial disintegration becomes a carefully calculated process of algorithmic morality. In the essential *Frankenstein* turn of events, the creation (machine) takes control of the humans (creators) (Shelley, 1996), reducing them to quantified humans who must act and conduct themselves as expected and no other.

The unresolved debate between nature and nurture tends to take a definitive turn in the society of *Ten with a Flag,* where the Central decides the child's score even before it is born and manipulates events to ensure they achieve a desirable outcome. That also leads them to decide beforehand that the child must be employed with Human Services for its 'great contribution' to society. It is not even unexpected at this point, where the wife also steps back from Johnnie and allies with the Central to maintain her social status quo, along with the baby's (Haines, 2010). It is indicative in itself how any sense of ethics operates in a subverted mode, leading to familial disintegration. In *Frankenstein*, as a proto-weird fiction of the 19th Century, a similar disintegration is seen. But the situation is reversed when the creator disowns the creation (Shelley, 1996). It takes a whole new dimension in redefining parent-child dynamics, where even an unborn child can decide a parent's fate. Looking at the present context, one can identify where the familial disintegration starts – at the dinner table, at a party, in slow evening family times – each member sitting with a screen in the hand and engaging in digital interaction over human interaction, sows the primary seeds of such extrapolated possibilities and levies a warning to get a grip over the situation.

3. The Dystopian Derangement: From Domestic to Political Domains

The dystopian subversion in today's context can also be seen as a kind of disorder where accepted norms and structures break down at the fragile boundary between human agency and machine control. The warning urges us to restore ethical responsibility in an age of increasing automation. The quintessential catastrophe in the socio-political context is an extended version of the familiar collapse, in which 'the ideals for improvement have gone tragically amok' (Jones & Paris, 2020). Zooming out from the immediate setting and plot of the dystopias and placing them in the larger order of the world will reveal that they carry an inherent strain of being 'political'. Totalitarian control and existential alienation are everyday human phenomena in the world's population. As viewed by Jones and Paris, "Humans are storytelling creatures: the stories we tell have profound implications for how we see our role in the world," and that "People often incorporate lessons from fictional stories into their beliefs, attitudes and value judgments, sometimes without even being aware that they are doing so" (Jones & Paris, 2020). Here, "powerful entities act to oppress and control citizens", along with a catastrophe of familiar and familial belief systems. "It was my little daughter," declares Parsons dolefully yet proudly upon being denounced for his anti-establishment dreams in *1984*. While it is an act of betrayal to our common perception, Parsons feels it's a testament of being "brought her up in the right spirit, anyway" (Orwell, 1949). As the cognitively supreme being, humankind has been the creator of machines and the upgrades they have undergone. However, the irony lies in the voluntary transfer of power to the machine. While the digital generation claims scope for 'self-expression' and 'freedom', they remain, ironically, imprisoned behind the screen. The 'cell phone' ironically becomes the 'cell' of this prison, holding back precious time and mind space (Cutts, 2016), making it a virtual panopticon, as mentioned (Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, 1995). Individuals today are urged by an increased longing

and demand for 'private space' and seek refuge in a digital reality that is becoming increasingly intrusive by the day. By spending more time with the connections on screen, the actual human bond is snapping apart irreparably, foreshadowing a similar moral collapse as seen in *The Veldt* and *Ten With a Flag*. The cumulative effect of this individual alienation is thus shaping into a collective form, thereby establishing a continuum from domestic/private to political/public dystopia.

Conclusion

A close study of these two texts starkly points out some scary realities of the unrealized dystopia that makes up the present world. The subverted ethics in 'The Veldt' and "Ten with a Flag' are just surface-level indicators of broader implications for AI ethics, democracy, and machine autonomy. It raises some worry-worthy questions on the natural role of parents and parental control. The quintessential dystopian alienation is necessarily not at a larger societal context, but even in the nuclear family units, with the equation between childhood autonomy and parental obsolescence becoming lopsided by the day. The children in the story are the perfect example of how buying these "automatic-tech" products designed to make life into a utopia can turn it into a scary dystopia (Ganguly, 2023). As literature is believed to be a reflection of society, speculative fiction re-imagines ethical obligations and moral bindings to restore order before it's too late.

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Bio-note

Ushita Banerjee inherits her love for literature from a family of eminent literary scholars. Owing to her call to explore the depths of literary imagination and pedagogical evolution, she remains integral to the education domain as an Assistant Professor in the School of Education and Humanities at Manav Rachna University, Faridabad, India. Her love for the subject and for teaching as a dynamic profession led her to the role of an IB educator. She is a passionate facilitator and pedagogy expert with extensive experience across international curricula like IB and Cambridge. She has previously served as Head of Department at eminent IB schools, and her IB journey has now spanned into the university domain, teaching pre-service teachers as an IBEC facilitator. She is driven by a passion for instilling love of the subject by making language and literature open up meaningful experiences in the classroom and beyond, on the wings of experimentation and innovation.

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