

Article

Dystopia or Utopia? Tracing Huxley's Influence on Ali Smith's Seasonal Quartet

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Abstract

This paper examines the influence of Aldous Huxley's dystopian vision—particularly *Brave New World*—on Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*, arguing that Smith's post-Brexit novels can be read as contemporary, politically embedded responses to the dystopian tradition Huxley helped establish. While Smith's fiction is rarely labelled dystopian in genre, the *Quartet* is deeply informed by a dystopic sense of cultural, ecological, and political decay in 21st-century Britain. I propose that Smith adopts and adapts key dystopian motifs from Huxley but repurposes them through a radical humanist lens that privileges relationality, art, and memory as sources of resistance and repair. The paper will be structured in three sections. The first outlines Huxley's dystopian framework, with a focus on *Brave New World*'s criticism of technological control, emotional appeasement, and the suppression of dissent through pleasure. The second analyzes Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* as a world not governed by totalitarian regimes but by apathy, misinformation, and ideological fragmentation. The final section traces Smith's divergence from Huxley: where Huxley's world often excludes hope in favor of bleak satire, Smith inserts gestures of resistance, particularly through intergenerational friendships, the presence of art and literature, and the recurrence of seasonal cycles as metaphors for renewal. Although *Autumn* explicitly references Huxley's *Brave New World*, sustained critical comparisons between the two authors remain relatively rare. Most scholarship approaches Huxley through the tradition of twentieth-century dystopian fiction, while Smith's *Quartet* is typically discussed within the context of Brexit literature and contemporary narrative experimentation. Reading the *Quartet* alongside Huxley, therefore, reveals an unexpected dialogue between early twentieth-century dystopian critique and twenty-first-century literary responses to political crisis.

Keywords: Ali Smith; Aldous Huxley; post-Brexit fiction; utopia/dystopia; art and resistance

1. Introduction Dystopia Reconsidered

Elisabeth goes back to the book and by chance the page she's on happens to be quoting Shakespeare. 'O brave new world!' Miranda was proclaiming the possibility of loveliness, the possibility of transforming even the nightmare into something fine and noble. 'O brave new world!' It was a challenge, a command.

Ali Smith, *Autumn*

The genre of dystopian fiction has long served as a mirror to societal anxieties, reflecting fears of totalitarianism, technological overreach, and the erosion of individuality. Within critical theory, dystopia is often understood not simply as a narrative of oppression but as a form of "anti-utopian" writing that emerges from the modern reconfiguration of utopian thought, particularly in response to industrialization, scientific rationality, and



Received: 29 March 2026

Revised: 2 May 2026

Accepted: 18 May 2026

Published: 21 May 2026

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state planning. As Krishan Kumar argues in *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Kumar 1987, p. 277), modern dystopian fiction should be read as part of a broader historical shift in which classical utopian hopes for human perfectibility give way to narratives that expose the dangers of rationalized social engineering and excessive systemic control. Thus, Huxley's World State can be understood not simply as a dystopia of control, but as an anti-utopian projection in which the modern desire for stability and happiness is extended to its logical extreme, revealing its own internal contradictions.

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (2021) stands as a seminal work within this tradition, presenting a vision of a future society where technological advancements and state control converge to suppress human autonomy and critical thought. Set in the year 632 A.F. (After Ford), the novel imagines a technologically advanced society in which biological engineering, consumerist ideology, and a state-enforced avoidance of pain create a world where conflict and suffering have been eliminated, but at the price of individuality, freedom, and authentic human experience.

Unlike Orwellian dystopias founded on surveillance and violence, Huxley's World State maintains social order through pleasure, conditioning, and the systematic suppression of history and critical thought. As Huxley himself warned in his later essays, the most dangerous kind of tyranny is one that renders its citizens submissive not through coercion, but through voluntary participation and psychological consent.

In 1931, while Huxley was writing the novel, Britain was experiencing severe political and economic instability: the government collapsed, the currency weakened, unemployment increased, production declined, and widespread unrest and strikes reflected a broader sense of national crisis linked to the wider global depression following the Great War and the 1929 financial crash. Against this backdrop of upheaval, Huxley produced an anti-utopian novel set in a distant future, which was nonetheless an immediate commercial success. However, some early readers, like Hicks (1932), questioned its relevance. He asked, for instance, why an anti-utopian work focused on abstract ideas like "stability" had been published at a time of urgent real-world crisis, implying that it avoided more pressing political concerns.

This skepticism developed into a wider critical consensus in the following years. Critics such as Wells (1934, 1940), Bernal (1967), Laski (1944), and Orwell (1968) variously described Huxley's novel as politically limited, ideologically weak, or less engaged with the realities of modern totalitarianism than comparable works. Scholars such as Shklar (1957) and Hillegas (1967) extended this view, arguing that the novel either lacks political insight altogether or reflects a detached, even elitist attitude toward social change and technological progress. Taken together, these assessments frame *Brave New World* primarily as a text whose political significance is contested and whose dystopian vision is often judged against its perceived distance from historical reality.

Against this critical background, the following section outlines the key philosophical and structural features of Huxley's dystopia: totalitarian hedonism, mass conditioning and the suppression of history, and the use of satire as a critical mode. These elements serve not only to define Huxley's own vision of dystopia but to provide a conceptual framework against which later writers, such as Ali Smith, develop more contemporary responses to the same problems. Understanding this foundation will illuminate the parallels and differences explored in the subsequent analysis of Smith's work.

1.1. Totalitarian Hedonism: Freedom Through Pleasure

The most distinctive and subversive feature of *Brave New World* is its depiction of a totalitarian regime not based on fear or repression, but on pleasure. In the World State, citizens are encouraged, or better conditioned, to seek constant enjoyment, whether through

casual sex, entertainment, or the ubiquitous consumption of the state-issued drug soma. In this society, “everybody’s happy now” (Huxley 2021, p. 97), a phrase that conceals the fact that such “happiness” is state-manufactured and chemically enforced. Read through Peter Firchow’s analysis in *The End of Utopia. A Study of Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World* (1984), this apparent shift from coercion to pleasure can be understood not simply as a mechanism of control, but as the endpoint of a collapsed utopian tradition in which the desire to eliminate suffering leads to the erasure of the very conditions that make meaningful freedom possible. As Mustapha Mond, one of the World Controllers, explains, “Actual happiness always looks pretty squalid in comparison with the overcompensations for misery. And, of course, stability isn’t nearly so spectacular as instability” (Huxley 2021, p. 289). The illusion of freedom is maintained precisely because citizens believe their pleasures are freely chosen, rather than programmed responses, a condition Firchow (1984) reads as characteristic of a world in which utopian aspiration has been fully absorbed into systems of rationalized control.

This totalitarian hedonism is, as Neil Postman suggests, more dangerous than overt oppression: “What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no one who wanted to read one” (Postman 2006, p. 19). In a society of endless distractions, individuals no longer even desire the freedoms they have lost. The citizens have been pleased not by brute force, but by comfort and the avoidance of anything unpleasant, whether it be truth, memory, or grief. This anticipates later criticisms of “soft” power and neoliberal governance, where choice becomes a mechanism of control.

1.2. Mass Conditioning and the Death of Individuality

Fundamental to the maintenance of Huxley’s dystopia is the complete eradication of individual differences. From birth, citizens are produced via the Bokanovsky Process, a form of industrialized cloning that allows one fertilized egg to yield dozens of nearly identical individuals. These mass-produced bodies are then sorted into castes—Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, and Epsilon—each prepared to embrace their place within the social hierarchy. As the Director of Hatcheries notes,

“We also predestine and condition. We decant our babies as socialized human beings, as Alphas or Epsilons, as future sewage workers or future. . .”. (Huxley 2021, p. 19)

Emotional life is equally regulated. Familial bonds, romantic attachments, and enduring friendships are viewed as destabilizing. The mantra “Everyone belongs to everyone else” erases the private self; eroticism is encouraged, but intimacy is pathologized. Soma, a calming narcotic without side effects, is distributed freely to suppress any form of existential unrest. Helmholtz Watson and Bernard Marx, whose heightened emotional and intellectual awareness sets them apart, are ostracized and ultimately exiled, thereby revealing the system’s general hostility toward individuality.

The death of individuality in *Brave New World* is not simply political but existential. The human subject is no longer capable of self-definition, because the self has been replaced by socially engineered responses. This vision prefigures many of the concerns of late capitalist and postmodern critiques, particularly the reduction of identity to consumer roles and the blurring of autonomy under algorithmic personalization.

1.3. Suppression of History and Critical Thought

In Huxley’s dystopia, history is systematically suppressed to protect the ideological apparatus of the present. “History is bunk” (Huxley 2021, p. 45) declares Mustapha Mond, reducing the past to a liability, a dangerous repository of individual memory and social upheaval. The controller’s private collection of forbidden books, including the Bible and the

works of Shakespeare, reveals that the regime's censorship is not rooted in ignorance but in calculated exclusion. Mond openly acknowledges that such texts must remain inaccessible because they generate forms of consciousness incompatible with social stability: "They're old; they're about God hundreds of years ago. Not about God now" (Huxley 2021, p. 302), he remarks, exposing the regime's determination to confine meaning entirely to the present.

Shakespeare's presence in the novel is especially significant. Through John Savage, whose imagination has been shaped almost exclusively by *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Huxley reintroduces a language of passion, suffering, and transcendence into a society that has abolished these experiences. John does not merely quote Shakespeare; he interprets reality through him and his language. When he first encounters Lenina, he invokes *The Tempest*: "O brave new world that has such people in it" (Huxley 2021, p. 180), a line whose initial wonder gradually turns ironic as he recognizes the moral vacuity of the World State. His emotional life is mediated through tragic discourse: he understands his love for Lenina in the elevated idiom of *Romeo and Juliet*, and his anguish in terms that echo *Othello* and *King Lear*. Shakespeare provides him with a vocabulary for jealousy, betrayal, and spiritual longing, i.e., experiences that the citizens of the World State, pacified by soma and conditioned pleasure, can neither articulate nor comprehend.

The contrast becomes explicit in John's confrontation with Mustapha. When Mond defends the suppression of high art in the name of happiness, he insists that "you can't make tragedies without social instability" (Huxley 2021, p. 288). Tragedy, by definition, presupposes conflict, suffering, and moral ambiguity, which is what the regime has eliminated. John's defiant declaration "But I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin" (Huxley 2021, p. 312) articulates the fundamental opposition between Shakespearean humanism and technocratic utilitarianism: to demand poetry means refusing simplification; to demand sin means insisting upon the presence of moral agency, since without the capacity to choose wrongly, ethical subjectivity cannot meaningfully exist.

Thus, the suppression of Shakespeare is not incidental but essential. Without access to the emotional and historical density embodied in tragic literature, citizens lack a vocabulary for critique or transcendence. As the narrator observes with biting irony, "You can't consume much if you sit still and read books" (Huxley 2021, p. 63). Literature, philosophy, and religion are replaced by "feelies", that is, superficial, sensory entertainments that simulate experience. The eradication of history ensures the impossibility of revolution; the eradication of Shakespeare ensures the impossibility of tragedy and therefore of freedom.

The suppression of critical thought in Huxley's world resonates deeply with contemporary anxieties about misinformation, memory loss, and the instrumentalization of culture. In eliminating access to the past, in confining Shakespeare to Mond's locked safe and to John's tragic consciousness, Huxley suggests that genuine art cannot coexist with total social management. Shakespeare survives in the novel only as relic and resistance, an embodiment of memory, suffering, and the irreducible complexity of the human condition.

1.4. Satire and Pessimism: Irony as a Dystopian Mode

Huxley's novel distinguishes itself by its sharp satirical tone. Through parody and irony, he criticizes not only fascist and communist totalitarianism but also the burgeoning culture of mass consumption, media triviality, and technocratic rationalism in his own time. His satire is directed at both the political and philosophical assumptions of the modern world: human suffering can and should be eliminated, progress is inherently good, and stability is the ultimate political virtue.

But Huxley's satire is also deeply pessimistic. His characters are not free; the Savage dies, and the rebels are exiled. There is no redemptive possibility, no promise of resistance

that might overthrow the regime. In this sense, *Brave New World* reflects a condition that we could call “dystopia without utopia”, a closed system that condemns the present but cannot imagine alternatives. It functions not to inspire change, but to issue a warning.

This closure is particularly significant when viewed alongside the work of later writers, such as Ali Smith, who grapple with similar themes of cultural amnesia and systemic disintegration but do so with a markedly different tone. While Smith is equally critical of political complacency and historical erasure, her work inserts moments of connection, care, and artistic renewal that resist the finality of Huxley’s dystopia.

Brave New World presents a disturbing portrait of a future in which pleasure replaces politics, conditioning replaces education, and history is sacrificed for convenience. The mechanisms of control in the book are not violent, but seductive, making his dystopia especially relevant to contemporary readers living under the pressures of commodified life and ideological manipulation. Ali Smith’s *Seasonal Quartet* responds to these same pressures with a different vision: one that acknowledges the dangers Huxley foresaw but seeks to reclaim history, art, and empathy as tools of resistance.

2. Smith’s Quartet as a Softened Dystopia

Is utopia now dead, as so often pronounced, and as appeared the case at least in the earlier part of the century? Or has it survived the battering of the anti-utopia? What are its current forms, and what place might it have in current thinking about the future of Western or world society?

Krishan Kumar

We live in the midst of a historical crisis in which our choices are between. . . utopia and the end of civilization, in which we are presented with the existential paradox of a necessary utopia.

Victor Ferkiss

Krishan Kumar’s questions are particularly useful for rethinking the boundaries between utopian and dystopian fiction. By refusing to declare utopia obsolete, Kumar instead positions it as a concept that persists in altered, hybrid, and sometimes disguised forms. This framework complicates the assumption that 20th-century dystopian writing simply replaces utopian thought with visions of irreversible decline (Kumar 1987, p. 381). Rather, it suggests an ongoing tension in which anti-utopian critique and utopian desire remain entangled.

Such is the case of Ali Smith’s *Seasonal Quartet*, comprising *Autumn* (Smith 2016), *Winter* (Smith 2017), *Spring* (Smith 2019), and *Summer* (Smith 2020), which can be read as a kind of softened dystopia where present-day crises such as Brexit, climate change, xenophobia, digital propaganda, and state-sanctioned dehumanization are revealed not through authoritarian spectacle but through emotional disconnection, cultural forgetting, and bureaucratic cruelty, thereby creating a subtler yet deeply unsettling vision of societal breakdown.

In this respect, Smith, like Aldous Huxley, offers a warning about a society that has lost both its memory and moral compass; however, unlike Huxley, she simultaneously locates within art, acts of care, and cross-generational solidarity the potential seeds of renewal and resistance, suggesting that even in moments of fragmentation, there remain possibilities for reconnection and hope.

As Dobrogoszcz observes, “the novels become a chronicle of the state transformation from the 2016 referendum to the UK’s effective departure from the EU in 2020, portraying Britain anguished by internal conflicts, xenophobia and racism, populist political campaigns and economic problems” (Dobrogoszcz 2021, p. 1), and this characterization not only underscores the political immediacy of Smith’s project but also highlights how the *Quartet* functions as an ongoing narrative of national change, mapping the emotional

and ideological consequences of Brexit across time. This understanding of Smith's work becomes even more illuminating when placed alongside broader critical discussions of Brexit-era literature, particularly in relation to how fiction engages with questions of identity, belonging, and political fracture.

For instance, Robert Eaglestone's *Brexit and Literature* examines how contemporary British fiction responds to the cultural and political rupture initiated by the 2016 referendum, arguing that "literature is an especially useful and appropriate way to address the political arguments about national identity which lie at the heart of Brexit" (Eaglestone 2018, p. 1), thus positioning literary texts like Smith's *Quartet* as crucial sites for understanding and interrogating the complexities of this historical moment.

Building on this perspective, O'Toole (2018, p. 107) argues in *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* that Brexit is driven by a "politics of pain" rooted in narratives of loss and imagined national decline, a framework that not only helps to explain the emotional intensity surrounding the referendum itself, but also provides a useful lens through which to read Ali Smith's novels, where personal disorientation and collective anxiety—with its emotional and ethical consequences—are repeatedly shown to intersect and mutually reinforce each other.

Read through this framework, Smith's *Quartet* exemplifies this affective response to Brexit by being written and published in proximity to the unfolding political turmoil, thereby capturing the atmosphere of uncertainty and polarization that followed the referendum while simultaneously interrogating the narratives of loss, exclusion, and mistrust that O'Toole identifies as central to its cultural logic in contemporary Britain.

As Heidemann (2020) argues in her analysis of post-referendum fiction, Brexit reveals a "Brexit within", a condition in which divisions between rural and urban spaces function as a template for wider social, cultural, and economic fractures, a dynamic that the *Quartet* subtly maps through its portrayal of a nation that is at once divided and interconnected during a period of profound political and social upheaval, thereby highlighting how seemingly local tensions reflect broader structural inequalities. Furthermore, as Edmonds (2022) suggests, Smith's works prompt a series of urgent questions about perception, responsibility, and emotional engagement, encouraging readers to reflect on how individuals relate to one another in times of crisis and how empathy might serve as a counterforce to fragmentation:

What does it mean to know that there are terrible things happening in the world, to know that those terrible things touch our lives whether we pay attention or not? What does it mean to pay attention? And, with what tools and what prior experiences do we organize our witnessing? How do we make space for the suffering of others in our lives without being overwhelmed, subsumed, or paralyzed?

Edmonds' reflections highlight the ethical dimension of witnessing that underpins Smith's fiction, emphasizing the difficulty of sustaining attention and empathy in an age of constant crisis but also the moral responsibility placed on both characters and readers to remain emotionally engaged despite the overwhelming flow of information, distraction, and desensitization that characterizes contemporary life.

Within this paradigm, the *Quartet* can be understood as an attempt to reimagine social connection at a historical moment when the broader cultural framework appears increasingly fragile and unstable, and by weaving together contemporary events, historical memory, and artistic reflection, Smith constructs a narrative that portrays a fractured national landscape while simultaneously tracing the subtle threads that continue to bind individuals to one another across time and difference. At the same time, she foregrounds the possibility of renewed forms of solidarity that emerge across generations, ideologies, and personal histories, suggesting that even in periods marked by division and uncertainty,

new modes of understanding and relationality can still take shape. In this sense, the novels transform the softened dystopia they depict into a space where denunciation and hope coexist, ultimately proposing that literature itself may function as a vital means of resisting the erosion of collective meaning and reasserting the value of shared human experience.

2.1. Political Fragmentation and Cultural Malaise: A Contemporary Dystopia

Each of these novels is rooted in a specific, politically fractured context. *Autumn* was the first post-Brexit novel, written and published at remarkable speed in the aftermath of the referendum, a context that not only shapes its thematic concerns but also informs its urgent tone and narrative structure. The novel opens with an epigraph from Dickens: “It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times” (Smith 2016, p. 3). This deliberate echo of *A Tale of Two Cities* immediately establishes a mood of disillusionment and repetition, suggesting that the present moment is marked by crisis in ways that resonate with historical upheavals. Much like the controlled society depicted in *Brave New World*, Smith’s Britain is not governed through overt technological domination but instead through subtler mechanisms such as media sound bites, bureaucratic barriers, and an increasingly hostile public sphere, all of which contribute to a pervasive atmosphere of confusion and alienation; as the unnamed narrator remarks, “All across the country, there was misery and rejoicing [. . .] All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing [. . .] All across the country people felt they’d really lost [. . .] All across the country, people looked up Google: *move to Scotland*” (Smith 2016, p. 59), encapsulating the simultaneity of conflicting emotions and the depth of national division.

This sense of social fracture, so vividly established in *Autumn*, becomes the conceptual thread that links the four novels. Rather than depicting a distant dystopian future, Smith presents a recognizably contemporary Britain in which everyday life is increasingly permeated by political tension, mistrust, and emotional disconnection. Each novel foregrounds a different manifestation of this broader malaise, with *Autumn* focusing on how the Brexit referendum generates an atmosphere of suspicion and cultural division, evident in Elisabeth Demand’s encounters with bureaucratic absurdity when attempting to renew her passport, as well as in the way public conversations become saturated with hostility toward migrants and so-called “outsiders”. Yet, at the same time, the friendship between Elisabeth and the elderly Daniel Gluck, a German-born “immigrant”, quietly resists this xenophobic climate, offering an alternative model of cultural openness and human connection that stands in stark contrast to the surrounding rhetoric of exclusion.

While xenophobia and border anxiety dominate in *Autumn*, the focus shifts in *Winter* towards themes of climate collapse and familial disconnection, both of which are often intensified by divergent political opinions that fracture not only public discourse but also private relationships. The strained relationship between Sophia Cleves and her sister Iris, for instance, mirrors the wider ideological fragmentation of British society, while the artificiality of Sophia’s carefully staged Christmas gathering reflects a deeper cultural emptiness. At the same time, environmental unease permeates the novel through recurring references to unseasonal weather, ecological degradation, and the gradual disappearance of familiar seasonal rhythms, i.e., elements that subtly frame the narrative and reinforce the sense that both social and natural systems are undergoing profound destabilization, thereby linking personal disconnection with broader environmental crisis.

If *Winter* foregrounds ideological and familial fragmentation, *Spring* turns more directly to the violence of contemporary border regimes, shifting the focus from interpersonal division to the institutional mechanisms that enforce exclusion and control, and in doing so, foregrounds the plight of migrants detained in immigration centers while exposing the bureaucratic indifference and moral detachment that allow such systems to function

with little accountability. This analysis is embodied in the character of Brit, who works within the detention centre and gradually becomes aware of the cruelty embedded in the institutional structures she serves, a realization that unfolds alongside the narrative of Richard Lease, a disillusioned filmmaker grieving the death of his friend Paddy, whose personal loss becomes intertwined with a broader disillusionment with media narratives that reduce complex human lives to simplistic political slogans. At the same time, the enigmatic Florence, a young girl who seems able to move effortlessly through these rigid structures, introduces an almost allegorical challenge to the logic of borders and control, suggesting the possibility of forms of perception and movement that resist institutional constraint.

Finally, *Summer* extends these concerns by reflecting the global uncertainty of the COVID-19 period while simultaneously deepening the *Quartet's* ecological concerns, rendering the conditions of lockdown through its depiction of digitally mediated communication, the erosion of physical contact, and a pervasive sense of suspended temporality that blurs the boundaries between past, present, and future. Crucially, however, Smith situates this present crisis within a broader constellation of unresolved historical and environmental injustices as the Greenlaw siblings' return to family histories shaped by wartime Europe intersects with the figure of Greta Thunberg, whose activism foregrounds the accelerating threat of ecological collapse. In bringing together pandemic anxiety, climate emergency, and historical memory, the novel reinforces the *Quartet's* overarching suggestion that contemporary society already manifests many of the structural and affective conditions associated with dystopian fiction, thereby collapsing the distance between speculative futures and lived reality.

Taken together, the four seasonal novels portray a fragmented cultural landscape in which political division, environmental crisis, and institutional indifference converge to reshape everyday experience, and rather than imagining a distant authoritarian future, Smith reveals how dystopian dynamics such as social alienation, bureaucratic dehumanization, and ecological precarity are already embedded within the present.

2.2. Obliteration of History and Critical Thought

What you reading? he'd say.
 Elisabeth would hold it up.
 Brave New World, she'd say.
 Oh, that old thing, he'd say.
 It's new to me, she'd say.

Ali Smith, *Autumn*

A key concern in both Huxley and Smith is the suppression or loss of history, a theme that operates at the very core of their respective dystopian visions, since in *Brave New World* the past is not merely neglected but actively forbidden, with history being systematically erased to safeguard the ideological apparatus of the present and to ensure the smooth functioning of a society built on control, stability, and the elimination of dissent.

This dystopian logic is explicitly taken up by Smith in *Autumn*, where Elisabeth reads *Brave New World* while discussing literature with Daniel Gluck, a scene that not only foregrounds the relevance of Huxley's warnings to contemporary Britain but also situates Smith's novel within a broader intertextual conversation. However, Smith's use of Huxley is itself layered through its connection to an even earlier text, namely *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare. Huxley's novel famously takes its title from Miranda's line in the play—"O brave new world, / That has such people in't"—a moment that, in its original context, expresses wonder at an apparently new beginning, yet in Huxley's dystopian reworking becomes deeply ironic as the "brave new world" it names is in fact a society that

has eliminated history to maintain technological and ideological stability. By embedding Huxley's novel within *Autumn*, Smith establishes a layered chain of intertextual references that moves from Shakespeare to Huxley and finally to her own contemporary moment and, in doing so, establishes a broader structural pattern that runs throughout the *Quartet*, whereby each novel incorporates and reanimates earlier literary voices within the present, thereby suggesting that cultural memory persists despite attempts to erase it and that fragments of the past continue to resurface, interrupting and complicating any effort to impose a condition of historical amnesia.

At the centre of this intertextual dynamic lies a shared concern with temporality, a theme that shapes the narrative logic of all three works and reveals how the control, manipulation, or recovery of time becomes central to questions of power, memory, and identity. In *Brave New World*, time is rigidly controlled and effectively flattened as the World State measures history according to the technological watershed of "A.F.", thereby resetting the calendar and erasing any sense of historical continuity that might challenge its authority, with the past surviving only as a forbidden archive accessible to a restricted elite who manage knowledge as a form of control. By contrast, in *The Tempest*, time is not linear but dramatically orchestrated since the entire action of the play unfolds within the carefully managed temporal framework established by Prospero, who manipulates events to restore a disrupted political order and, as a result, time becomes both theatrical and restorative, structured around memory, reconciliation, and the possibility of historical redress rather than simple progression.

Drawing on these contrasting models of temporal control and restoration, Smith transforms them in her own work so that in *Autumn* time becomes layered rather than controlled, with the narrative repeatedly shifting between Elisabeth's present-day experience of post-referendum Britain and Daniel Gluck's memories of earlier historical moments, including his childhood during the rise of Nazism and his encounters with the artistic and cultural transformations of the twentieth century. These temporal shifts disrupt any stable sense of historical progression by allowing past and present to coexist within the same narrative space, thereby suggesting that contemporary political tensions cannot be understood in isolation but are inseparable from earlier histories of nationalism, migration, and cultural exchange.

This tension between erasure and persistence is further developed in Smith's depiction of contemporary Britain where history is often neglected, trivialized, or commodified, yet never fully disappears, so that characters experience a pervasive sense of cultural rupture following the Brexit vote, while political slogans, media rhetoric, and public division reveal how narratives about nationhood, identity, and belonging are actively being reshaped in the present. At the same time, Smith insists that the present is always layered with earlier moments as memories, historical figures, and artistic traditions continually intrude upon contemporary reality, reminding readers that time operates not as a linear sequence but as a recursive and overlapping process.

One of the primary vehicles for this persistence of memory is the character of Daniel Gluck who, in *Autumn*, serves as a living repository of cultural memory, linking Elisabeth to forgotten episodes of 1960s British art history and political activism but also to the enduring trauma of World War II and the rise of Nazism. Through their relationship, Smith dramatizes the value of memory and its role in resisting cultural amnesia. When he remarks to Elisabeth that "Whoever makes up the story makes up the world" (Smith 2016, p. 119), he foregrounds the generative power of narrative, thus positioning storytelling itself as a form of resistance to the temporal flattening that defines dystopian visions like that of Aldous Huxley.

This restorative impulse extends beyond individual characters to encompass broader cultural histories as Smith also seeks to recover overlooked and marginalized figures from the past, most notably the British Pop artist Pauline Boty, whose life and work become central to the narrative and who, as a pioneering yet largely forgotten figure, represents precisely the kind of cultural memory that risks disappearing from official historical accounts. Her relative obscurity contrasts sharply with the canonical status of male contemporaries such as Andy Warhol, highlighting the unequal recognition afforded to artists of her generation. By reinserting her into the narrative, Smith performs an act of literary and cultural recovery that demonstrates how fiction can restore visibility to neglected stories and challenge dominant historical narratives.

More broadly, this strategy operates across the *Quartet* as a whole, where Smith repeatedly refers to historical writers and artists, creating a dense network of cultural memory that complicates any simplistic understanding of historical progress and instead presents history as a construct shaped by competing voices and interpretations, foregrounding the processes through which the past is told, forgotten, and continually reinvented in response to present concerns.

This interplay between personal memory and historical narrative is further developed in *Winter* where the weight of historical events—the Cold War, the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp protests, and the political climate of the Thatcher years—hovers over personal and national life so that history is embedded within the fractured relationships of the Cleves family and the tension between Sophia and her estranged sister Iris comes to reflect competing interpretations of the past, with Sophia representing capitalist pragmatism and social conservatism, while Iris embodies political activism and anti-establishment values. Their conflicting memories demonstrate how personal narratives shape historical understanding, ultimately transforming a family dispute into a microcosm of the broader ideological divisions that define contemporary Britain.

If *Winter* embeds history within familial conflict, *Spring* extends this dynamic at the level of narrative form so that the tension between rupture and continuity is not only thematically present but also formally inscribed within the structure of the novel itself, where a real-time train journey is continually juxtaposed with flashbacks to post-war art, letters, and poetry, thereby creating a layered and non-linear narrative. As the story follows Richard Lease travelling north through Britain, the apparent linearity of his movement through space is repeatedly disrupted by memories, historical references, and literary fragments that interrupt and reshape the flow of the narrative. Through this process Ali Smith integrates the voices of figures such as the modernist writer Katherine Mansfield and the sculptor Barbara Hepworth, whose writings and artistic legacies emerge as active, living presences rather than distant or static historical references. Through this intricate interweaving of temporal layers, Smith implies that art and literature function as repositories of historical consciousness, so that even when the present appears disconnected from the past, artistic expression continues to preserve alternative forms of memory and meaning that resist erasure.

This insistence on historical continuity reaches its fullest articulation in *Summer*, where the writer expands the temporal scope of the *Quartet* by connecting contemporary crises to the political and moral legacies of the twentieth century. By setting the novel during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, she situates contemporary experiences of isolation within a broader historical continuum so that the characters’ experiences of lockdown are repeatedly juxtaposed with references to World War II and its aftermath, particularly through the story of the internment of so-called “enemy aliens” in Britain during the 1940s.

Taken together, the four novels resist narratives of historical rupture by insisting on the persistence of cultural memory across time and through the layering of personal recollection, artistic reference, and political history. Smith constructs a model of history that remains active and unresolved within the present, continually shaping contemporary experience rather than receding into the past. In this respect, the *Quartet* stands in striking contrast to the world imagined in *Brave New World*, in which social stability depends precisely on the systematic eradication of historical consciousness, since, whereas Huxley's characters accept the present as natural, inevitable, and permanent, Smith's characters struggle to interpret and inhabit their own moment precisely because its relationship to the past has been obscured, fractured, and yet continues to demand recognition.

2.3. *The Language of Resistance: Form as Politics*

In contrast to the rigid, closed linguistic system depicted in *Brave New World*, the novels of the *Quartet* employ a wide range of stylistic strategies that foreground openness, plurality, and creative transformation, and, in doing so, they actively challenge the idea that language can or should function as a tool of control, as a dynamic and evolving medium. As Monica Germanà and Emily Horton observe in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, Smith's writing is distinguished by its "formal experimentation" or "playfulness" (Germanà and Horton 2013, p. 1), a quality that extends beyond mere aesthetic innovation and carries significant political implications, since it resists the standardization and simplification often associated with dominant ideological systems. Smith's narrative style, which is characterized by fragmentation, intertextual play, shifts in narrative register, and surreal moments, works to destabilize narrative coherence and resist interpretative closure, and, by doing so, it undermines the notion that social or political reality can be fully contained within a single authoritative framework, promoting a literary language that challenges the ideological tendencies toward simplification, control, and uniformity that underpin dystopian systems.

A defining feature of Smith's prose is its structural fluidity, which manifests in her refusal to adhere to conventional linear progression, so that the novels unfold through digression, associative movement, and frequent narrative interruption, creating a reading experience that mirrors the complexity and unpredictability of lived experience. Rather than following a straightforward chronological order, episodes emerge organically through dialogue, memory, anecdote, and reflection, and this fragmented yet interconnected structure produces what has been described as "a temporality abstracted from the present" (Germanà and Horton 2013, p. 92), or, as Levin suggests, a form of "temporality [. . .] structured not by regularly ticking seconds, but by memory and fantasy" (Germanà and Horton 2013, p. 38), thereby reinforcing the sense that time within Smith's fiction is experiential and subjective rather than fixed and measurable.

As Ali Smith writes, "Here's an old story so new [. . .] that it's still in the middle of happening, writing itself right now with no knowledge of where or how it'll end" (Day 2017), a formulation that self-reflexively captures the open-ended, processual nature of her narrative method, while also emphasizing the extent to which storytelling, in her work, resists closure and remains embedded in the unfolding present. This idea is reinforced by Jon Day, who observes in his review (Day 2017) that *Autumn* unfolds in a way that deliberately resists resolution, embodying a form that remains provisional and continually in flux. This emphasis on storytelling as an ongoing process rather than a finished product ultimately reinforces Smith's broader refusal of fixed narrative structures, foregrounding instead a conception of temporality and form that is constantly being reshaped in response to contemporary realities.

In *Autumn*, for instance, reflections on the life and work of the British Pop artist Pauline Boty are intricately interwoven with scenes depicting post-referendum Britain and passages that are embedded within the narrative fabric itself, generating a hybrid form that moves seamlessly between cultural criticism, storytelling, and reflective meditation. As a result, the novel resists stable generic classification and, instead, foregrounds its own processes of construction, encouraging readers to remain aware of how meaning is produced through the interplay of different discursive modes.

Across the *Quartet*, this formal experimentation is further developed through rapid shifts in tone, as the narrative moves between satire, philosophical reflection, lyricism, and comic absurdity, thereby destabilizing conventional expectations of realism and challenging the reader's assumptions about narrative coherence. In *Winter*, for example, the recurring image of the disembodied child's head that appears to Sophia Cleves introduces an uncanny disruption into what initially appears to be a familiar domestic setting, which in turn functions not as a fixed or easily interpretable symbol but as a stylistic disturbance that interrupts narrative continuity, exposes the underlying psychological and social tensions of the text, and ultimately unsettles the reader's interpretative certainties.

Another key aspect of Smith's narrative form is its polyphonic structure, which is particularly evident in *Spring*, where the narrative perspective shifts between characters such as Richard Lease, Brittany Hall, and the enigmatic Florence, whose experiences initially seem disconnected but are gradually brought into relation without ever being subsumed into a single dominant viewpoint. This multiplicity of voices exemplifies what critics identify as Smith's commitment to narrative plurality, as it allows divergent experiences, perspectives, and emotional registers to coexist within the same textual space, thereby resisting reductive or standardizing representations of political reality and producing a narrative form that mirrors the complexity and fragmentation of contemporary social life.

Intertextuality further reinforces this openness as references to writers such as Shakespeare, Dickens, and Keats are woven throughout the *Quartet* alongside engagements with visual art and broader cultural history. These allusions emerge organically within dialogue, memory, and moments of narrative digression, thereby creating a network of cultural echoes that reverberate across time. Rather than functioning as external commentary or decorative reference, they become an integral part of the narrative texture, positioning the novels as sites of ongoing dialogue between past and present artistic forms and emphasizing the continuity of cultural memory.

At the level of language, Smith's prose foregrounds its own materiality through word-play, repetition, and rhythmic variation so that sentences often unfold through associative logic, incorporating puns and unexpected semantic connections that draw attention to the generative flexibility of language itself. This linguistic playfulness stands in stark contrast to the reductive, instrumental language of Huxley's dystopia, in which communication is subordinated to processes of ideological conditioning. In *Summer*, this experimentation becomes even more expansive, as the narrative brings together multiple strands, including dialogue, historical anecdote, and reflections on contemporary crises, without resolving them into a unified conclusion, instead remaining deliberately open and inviting the reader to participate actively in the production of meaning.

Through these formal strategies—fragmentation, polyphony, tonal hybridity, surreal interruption, and intertextual layering—Smith constructs a literary form that resists ideological rigidity so that where Huxley's dystopian vision reduces language to repetition and control, Smith's fiction affirms ambiguity, multiplicity, and imaginative freedom as essential components of both artistic expression and ethical engagement.

This formal openness is therefore not merely an aesthetic choice but is central to the political force of her writing as the *Quartet* demonstrates how narrative form itself

can function as a mode of resistance, preserving the transformative potential of language against the pressures of ideological closure. Indeed, as Julie Myerson observes, Smith's work "likes to mess with your head—to jar and disorientate, to twist ideas out of their formal boundaries and make them crash around like irascible poltergeists" (Myerson 2012), a quality that underscores the disruptive energy and the liberatory possibilities of her narrative strategies.

3. Influence and Divergence

The thematic and structural parallels between Huxley's *Brave New World* and Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* suggest that Smith is consciously and unconsciously writing in the long shadow of Huxley's dystopian tradition since both writers engage with questions of individuality, historical memory, systemic control, and the function of art in societies under pressure, even as their treatments of these shared concerns diverge significantly in tone, purpose, and political vision. While Huxley's dystopia is characterized by a pervasive sense of irony and resignation, in which the possibility of resistance appears limited or foreclosed, Smith's fiction works through dissonance and fragmentation toward an ethical orientation grounded in care, artistic practice, and relationality, thereby offering a more open-ended and potentially restorative response to contemporary crises.

3.1. The Role of Art and Cultural Memory. Retrotopias at Work

For both Huxley and Smith, art occupies a central position in the question of human freedom, although its role is conceived in fundamentally different ways, since in *Brave New World* art is either censored or stripped of its emotional force precisely because it poses a threat to the stability of the anesthetized social order, leading to the banning of Shakespeare, the closure of museums and the broader suppression of creative expression as something inherently dangerous. As Mustapha Mond declares, "You've got to choose between happiness and what people used to call high art. We've sacrificed the high art" (Huxley 2021, p. 288), a statement that encapsulates the novel's central premise that genuine artistic experience—because it provokes strong emotions and raises difficult, unsettling questions—is fundamentally incompatible with a society built on engineered contentment and ideological control.

This understanding of art as an active and transformative force is not only contrasted but actively reimagined in Smith's work, a perspective that is further reinforced by her own reflections in conversation with Amy E. Elkins, where she explicitly rejects the notion that art exists separately from lived reality, by insisting that "Has art anything to do with life? They're the same thing" (Elkins 2019) and by describing the novel as "porous skin surface", through which the immediacy of the present moment can pass. Through this formulation, Smith conceptualizes the novel as a responsive and permeable form that allows contemporary events, historical memories, and diverse voices to intersect within the textual space. Her collage-like method, which brings together disparate images, stories, and temporalities, reflects a sustained commitment to connection rather than division. In this sense, art does not provide escape from the pressures of the present but instead functions as a mode of active engagement, one that disrupts dominant narratives, reveals hidden structures of exclusion, and reshapes how individuals perceive and relate to one another, a conception that sharply contrasts with Huxley's dystopia, where art must be suppressed precisely because of its capacity to unsettle, question, and reimagine the world.

In Smith's fiction, this understanding of art as inseparable from life becomes materially and formally visible as the recurring presence of visual and literary art throughout the *Quartet* plays a central role in articulating its ethical and political vision. In *Autumn*, for example, the vibrant and politically charged collages of Pauline Boty interrupt the

narrative with images of vitality, protest, and female creativity, thereby functioning as counter-images to cultural amnesia and historical erasure. The rediscovery of Boty within the novel suggests that art has the capacity to recover suppressed histories and to open up alternative ways of seeing and interpreting the present, thus reinforcing the idea that cultural memory can be both restored and reactivated through artistic practice.

This restorative function becomes even more pronounced in *Winter*, where it extends beyond individual artworks to shape the novel's broader aesthetic and political strategies. As Alexandra Harris observes Smith "looks out over a contemporary landscape of violent exclusion, lies, suffering (the book has been written and published so quickly that this summer's tragedies are among its solstitial dark points), and fashions a novel which, in its very inclusiveness, associative joy and unrestricted movement, proposes other kinds of vision" (Harris 2017), a comment that underscores how the novel's formal openness itself becomes a mode of resistance. In this way, the aesthetic strategies of the text—its fluid structure, its inclusivity, and its associative movement—actively counteract the rigid divisions and exclusions it depicts, demonstrating how literary form can intervene in and reshape the conditions of the present.

In *Winter*, the novel's fragmented structure mirrors the emotional and political fractures of contemporary Britain, yet, despite this pervasive sense of division, art continues to operate as a subtle but persistent connective force. References to storytelling, visual imagery, and literary tradition create moments in which characters momentarily escape ideological rigidity. Although art does not resolve the conflicts that define the characters' relationships or the broader social tensions they inhabit, it nevertheless enables processes of reflection and recognition, allowing them to glimpse alternative perspectives beyond their entrenched positions and thereby suggesting that cultural memory can endure through aesthetic forms that resist simplification.

In *Spring*, this role of art becomes more explicitly tied to ethical awakening. The poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, particularly *Letters to a Young Poet*, circulates through the narrative as a quiet yet powerful counterpoint to the bureaucratic violence of immigration detention centers, and Rilke's emphasis on patience, introspection, and openness to uncertainty stands in stark contrast to the institutional logic of control and categorization that governs the novel's political landscape. Within this context, the letters take on an almost talismanic function, serving as a reminder that art can sustain and nurture interior life even within systems specifically designed to suppress empathy, reduce individuality, and limit emotional engagement.

By the time Smith reaches *Summer*, art appears less as a refuge and more as a necessary condition for thinking differently about crisis and connection. The novel interweaves historical fragments, storytelling traditions, and acts of imaginative play that enable characters to reframe their experiences of isolation and social fragmentation within a broader and more interconnected perspective. In this sense, art does not provide clear or immediate solutions to the political or ecological problems the novel engages with; rather, it creates spaces of reflection in which suppressed histories can be recognized, and dominant narratives can be questioned, thereby encouraging a more critical and self-aware engagement with the present.

This dynamic can be further illuminated through Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "retrotopia" (Bauman 2017), which describes a contemporary tendency to seek orientation in an imagined past rather than in uncertain or unstable futures. Although Smith's *Quartet*, with its dense network of references to forgotten artists, historical moments, and literary tradition, might initially appear to participate in this retrospective impulse, it ultimately resists such nostalgia by mobilizing the past critically and creatively. Rather than presenting history as a site of lost stability, to which one might return, Smith uses cultural memory as

a means of reactivating unresolved histories and opening alternative perspectives on the present, and in doing so, she avoids the regressive pull of retrotopia by refusing to treat the past as a fixed or idealized destination.

Instead, her engagement with cultural memory works to complicate and expand the possibilities of the present moment, transforming the past into a resource for ethical attention and imaginative renewal, and ensuring that memory remains dynamic, contested, and generative rather than merely restorative in a reductive or nostalgic sense.

3.2. Reframing the *Tempest* in Huxley and Smith

She must be Miranda, from *The Tempest*.

Miranda from *The Tempest* is reading *Brave New World*.

Ali Smith, *Autumn*

Both Huxley and Smith draw on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which functions not merely as a literary reference but as a rich textual touchstone through which broader and more complex questions about language, culture, and political imagination are explored. Read through Kristeva's (2024) notion of intertextuality, however, Shakespeare's presence in both texts can be understood as part of a wider "mosaic of quotations" in which texts are always already shaped by their relation to other texts, so that meaning emerges through processes of transformation, repetition, and recontextualization rather than through textual autonomy. From this perspective, Shakespeare in Huxley and Smith does not function as a stable form of inheritance but as a site where different ideological and historical forces intersect, producing contrasting models of cultural memory and literary transmission.

In *Brave New World*, Shakespeare comes to represent not simply a lost cultural inheritance but an entire mode of thinking and feeling that has been systematically erased from society. The novel's dystopian society has deliberately eliminated Shakespeare's works, along with other forms of "high" culture, because they encourage emotional depth, individual reflection, and moral ambiguity, all of which are incompatible with a society built on stability and consumerist pleasure. Shakespeare's language survives only tenuously through the character of John the Savage, who learns it from a forbidden book left by his mother, making it both precious and precarious, as it were a fragment of an intertextual network that has been violently interrupted.

For John, Shakespeare becomes not just a source of knowledge but the primary interpretative framework through which he understands, processes, and attempts to describe the world around him so that his speech is saturated with quotations and echoes from plays such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear*, and *The Tempest*, creating a linguistic identity that is itself structured through what Kristeva would describe as a dense layering of textual traces. Yet, this reliance on Shakespearean language also serves to isolate John, since the intertextual richness of his speech cannot be shared or decoded within the flattened linguistic system of the World State, thereby transforming intertextuality itself into a site of alienation rather than connection. When John quotes Miranda's line from *The Tempest*, he does so with genuine wonder and awe upon first encountering the technologically advanced and seemingly harmonious society of the World State and while the line initially conveys hope and amazement, Huxley quickly transforms its meaning into irony, so that what Miranda imagines as the hopeful beginning of a new world becomes, instead, a critical reflection on a civilization that has sacrificed human depth in the pursuit of efficiency and pleasure.

The Shakespearean quotation thus operates in *Brave New World* as a powerful marker of cultural dislocation as John's repeated references to Shakespeare not only underscore his personal alienation but also highlight the profound gap between the emotional richness and complexity of Renaissance drama and the deliberately flattened emotional register of the World State, an impoverishment that becomes particularly evident in a society reduced

to communicating through slogans and psychological conditioning. In this context, Shakespeare's language evokes suffering, passion, jealousy, and tragedy, i.e., experiences that the engineered society seeks to eliminate through conditioning and the pervasive use of soma, thereby reinforcing Huxley's positioning of Shakespeare as a symbol of authentic human feeling and emotional depth. As Jerome Meckier emphasizes, "Shakespeare becomes and remains for Huxley the incarnation of the ideal, complete artist who sees the multiplicity of life. The poet-dramatist stands for the artist who strives to record that multiplicity with scrupulous fairness in all its aspects out of a desire for inclusiveness, a quality Huxley fondly equates with wholeness or integrity" (Meckier 1971, p. 132). Yet the novel suggests that such language, however rich and meaningful, can no longer circulate within the World State's controlled semiotic place and therefore lacks the power to transform it.

By contrast, Ali Smith's engagement with Shakespeare in *Autumn* operates through a more dynamic and dialogic form of intertextuality, which more closely aligns with Kristeva's understanding of texts as open systems of meaning production, as she integrates Shakespearean language into the very texture of the narrative rather than presenting it as a relic of a vanished cultural world. References to *The Tempest* emerge within a novel deeply concerned with questions of national identity, cultural memory, and political uncertainty in post-referendum Britain, yet Smith does not deploy Shakespeare merely to evoke nostalgia for a lost literary tradition; instead, she mobilizes it in order to create an ongoing intertextual conversation between past and present, allowing earlier texts to actively inform and reshape contemporary experience.

In this sense, Shakespeare's play, with its thematic focus on exile, transformation, illusion, and the possibility of reconciliation, provides a rich conceptual framework through which Smith explores the conditions of contemporary political fragmentation, while the novel's recurring reflections on art, storytelling, and imagination in times of crisis, parallel Prospero's use of narrative and illusion, thus foregrounding ideas of continuity, renewal and creative reimagining across shifting historical contexts.

Moreover, Shakespeare's language becomes integral to the novel's stylistic and imaginative tendencies as Smith's prose frequently echoes the rhythm, playfulness, and linguistic experimentation associated with his work with puns, repetitions, and associative leaps, generating a sense of vitality that reflects Kristeva's notion of intertextual productivity, whereby meaning is continually generated through the reactivation of prior texts in new contexts. In this way, Shakespeare's voice continues to resonate in the present as part of an ongoing textual network, inviting readers toward acts of cultural resistance and imaginative renewal through the recognition that literature itself is always a space of transformation rather than mere preservation.

3.3. *The Individual, Empathy, and the Ordinary Radical*

In Huxley's dystopia, the individual is rendered largely obsolete as all significant aspects of life—work, love, family, and identity—are meticulously predetermined and regulated by an all-encompassing system that leaves little room for spontaneity or personal agency. Human beings are conditioned from birth to fulfil specific social roles within this rigid hierarchy, effectively eliminating the possibility of genuine individuality or moral autonomy, so that even the rare exceptions ultimately serve to reveal the limits of resistance within this structure, since those who dare to question or deviate from the system's norms are either exiled to its margins or destroyed altogether. As a result, the World State emerges as a system that cannot be meaningfully reformed from within, because its internal logic permits only absolute conformity or total exclusion, thereby ensuring that individual consciousness, whenever it arises, is immediately perceived as a threat that must be neutralized.

In contrast, Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* explores a markedly different dynamic between individuals and the systems that shape their lives, emphasizing relational and ethical forms of resistance rather than dramatic or overt attempts at systemic overthrow, even though her characters remain deeply entangled in powerful institutional and political structures, such as immigration bureaucracy, media saturation, and the pervasive climate of political cynicism surrounding Brexit. Within this context, resistance takes on subtler and quieter forms, as Elisabeth's sustained commitment to art and care in *Autumn*, Florence's striking moral clarity and quietly defiant intelligence in *Spring*, and the tentative yet meaningful emotional reconciliations that unfold in *Summer* all collectively offer counterpoints to the pervasive sense of political paralysis that defines Britain's post-referendum moment. Ultimately, as Ema Jelínková observes, "for all her challenging formal experiments and focus on dark subject matters, Smith is committed to telling a universal story which underlines the fact that, when stripped of all particulars, human experience is universally shared after all" (Jelínková and Rachael 2019, p. 9), i.e., a perspective that reinforces the ethical significance of these seemingly modest yet deeply resonant acts of resistance.

Crucially, Smith locates the power of the individual not in heroic confrontation with oppressive systems but in the capacity to create and sustain meaningful connections across difference. Her novels repeatedly emphasize moments of relational care: a young woman sitting beside the bed of an aging friend, a child responding with instinctive compassion to the suffering of strangers, or characters rediscovering forgotten artworks and shared cultural histories, which, although modest in scale, acquire a radical significance within a broader context of political alienation and social fragmentation. In this respect, Smith's focus contrasts sharply with Huxley's imagined society, which systematically suppresses such relational sensibilities to maintain order and stability, thereby allowing her to reclaim the individual not as an isolated or heroic figure of resistance but as someone fundamentally embedded within networks of ethical responsibility and shared vulnerability.

This emphasis on relationality resonates strongly with Zygmunt Bauman's reflections on ethical responsibility toward strangers. In *Strangers at Our Door*, he observes that fear and exclusion often emerge from encounters with the unknown, while insisting that hope and genuine moral engagement become possible when individuals choose to remain present with those who are vulnerable or different (Bauman 2016, pp. 49–50). Significantly Smith's characters enact this principle in practice, as they confront moments of crisis not through domination or control but through attention, empathy, and care, thereby demonstrating how ethical life is realized through everyday relational practices. Whereas Huxley's society systematically suppresses empathy in order to preserve its artificial stability, Smith's work instead positions empathy itself as a form of resistance, understood as a refusal to abandon others even in the face of overwhelming structural forces.

The character of Florence in *Spring* embodies this ethical vision with particular clarity, as, despite being a young girl navigating the harsh and dehumanizing environment of an immigration detention system, she does attempt to overthrow institutional power directly but, instead, transforms the emotional landscape of those around her through her presence. Through her clarity, curiosity, and refusal to accept bureaucratic indifference as inevitable, she disrupts the moral complacency of the adults who operate within the system.

As Christine Berberich has observed (Berberich 2022, pp. 31–45), migrant voices are frequently rendered inaudible within dominant political discourse, spoken about rather than allowed to speak for themselves. Smith's fiction actively resists this silencing by foregrounding moments in which marginalized figures are encountered not as abstract categories, but as fully realized individuals, whose presence unsettles systems built upon indifference and exclusion. In this way, Florence exemplifies how small, yet persistent acts of moral attentiveness can challenge institutionalized neglect without confronting it head-on.

Similarly, in *Summer*, characters who initially appear divided by generational conflict, political disagreement, or deep personal estrangement gradually move toward moments of recognition and mutual understanding, i.e., transformations that occur not through ideological persuasion or argument but through shared presence, attentive listening, waiting, patience, and a willingness to remain open to one another's vulnerability.

Such moments collectively reflect an ethical framework that resonates with strands of contemporary feminist and posthuman thought, within which resistance is not always imagined as the dramatic overthrow of oppressive systems, but rather as the practice of living differently within them. Within this framework, hope emerges not from seeking simplistic resolutions but from the act of remaining present in complex and troubled realities. Smith's characters embody this principle insofar as they neither repair the world nor escape its crises but instead refuse to abandon one another within it, thereby demonstrating how small, everyday acts of attention, empathy, and care can become meaningful and sustained forms of resistance. Through these gestures, the *Quartet* ultimately articulates a mode of resistance grounded not in domination or heroic rebellion, but in the quiet persistence of human connection, offering a radical ethical alternative to the coercive and dehumanizing logic that structures Huxley's dystopian vision.

3.4. Structure, Temporality, and Utopian Imagination

The narrative design of *Brave New World* reinforces the rigidity of the society it portrays as Huxley constructs a world that is effectively sealed, opening within the carefully controlled environment of the World State and ultimately returning to the same unaltered and self-sustaining order. Although temporary disruptions occur—most notably through the presence of John the Savage—these disturbances fail to challenge or destabilize the system itself so that the plot unfolds with a sense of calculated inevitability that mirrors the novel's broader depiction of time as a form of regulated repetition, in which stability is maintained through constant productivity and the meticulous management of pleasure. Within such a framework, not only are social structures rigidly maintained, but emotional and intellectual life are also subjected to strict control, leaving little room for reflection or genuine transformation.

As a consequence, inner life itself becomes progressively diminished, to the point that even the language of moral longing begins to lose its meaning so that John the Savage's tragedy lies not only in his inability to escape the World State but also in the incompatibility between his emotional and moral vocabulary and the society he is forced to confront. His yearning for depth—his desire for "God", "poetry" and "freedom"—belongs to a moral and cultural framework that the World State has deliberately eradicated. In a civilization explicitly designed to eliminate suffering and intensity of feeling, such aspirations cannot be integrated, leaving John fundamentally alienated within a world that has no place for the kind of humanity he represents.

By contrast, the *Quartet* unfolds through a far more fluid and open narrative framework, as its organization around the cyclical progression of the four seasons resists any strictly linear sense of development, with each novel corresponding to a particular moment of the year, while simultaneously allowing the boundaries between past, present, and future to remain constantly shifting. Memories surface unexpectedly, historical figures and artworks re-enter contemporary scenes, and moments of anticipation exist alongside recollections of what has already occurred so that Smith's narrative approach captures the lived, emotional atmosphere of a historical moment before it becomes fixed into established ideological forms. In this way, the temporality that emerges within the *Quartet* cannot be neatly categorized as either traditionally utopian or conventionally dystopian but instead, appears dynamic, ecological, and constantly in motion.

Such formal openness creates space for the articulation of possibility, i.e., an element that is largely absent from Huxley's tightly controlled narrative so that in *Spring*, for instance, Smith explicitly gestures toward renewal: "We need to offer hope. We need to say it's a new era the old era's dead their time's over it's our time now." (Smith 2019, p. 5). By anchoring the novels within the recurring rhythm of seasonal change, she suggests that even within periods marked by political fracture and cultural uncertainty, the prospect of transformation remains imaginable while acts of attention themselves—noticing, remembering, and responding to the world—become forms of quiet defiance that resist the inertia and disengagement often accompanying social crisis.

Smith's novels, therefore, engage directly with the dystopian legacy represented by Huxley while simultaneously reshaping its ethical and aesthetic premises. Whereas *Brave New World* warns against the dangers of complacency produced by manufactured pleasure, Smith addresses a comparable form of emotional flattening emerging from contemporary political and ecological pressures yet responds not by depicting total despair but by foregrounding care, artistic engagement, and narrative openness as ways of sustaining meaning within unstable conditions.

Unlike Huxley's novel, which ultimately culminates in tragedy and isolation, the *Quartet* resists narrative closure and maintains the possibility of renewal as Smith does not deny or minimize the seriousness of present-day conflicts—particularly those linked to Brexit and widening social divisions—but rather frames these tensions within a broader pattern of endurance, adaptation and change, so that the hope present in her fiction emerges as a deliberate and sustained ethical stance.

This orientation, in turn, shapes the *Quartet*'s distinctive vision of resistance, which privileges not dramatic rebellion or overt confrontation, but a quieter, more persistent refusal to relinquish empathy and imagination, with the seasonal framework itself reinforcing this ethos by tracing a movement from the reflective stillness of autumn through the estrangements of winter, toward the tentative renewal of spring and the fragile reconciliations of summer. Set against the static temporality of Huxley's dystopia—where stability depends upon the endless reproduction of the present—this cyclical progression suggests that change, however gradual, remains conceivable so that seasonal time operates both as an organizing principle and as a powerful metaphor for social and emotional transformation, ultimately implying that even within a fractured political landscape, the seeds of renewal may persist wherever attentiveness, collective care and imaginative engagement endure.

4. Discussion

This paper has argued that *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley provides a crucial conceptual and intertextual backdrop for reading the *Seasonal Quartet* by Ali Smith. While Smith's novels are not formally dystopian, they evoke a distinctly dystopic atmosphere shaped by Brexit, media saturation, ecological anxiety, and the erosion of shared meaning. Like Huxley, Smith interrogates systems that placate and fragment individuals while highlighting the risks of cultural amnesia and ideological complacency. In this sense, the *Quartet* can be understood as a contemporary rearticulation of Huxley's warning: a portrait of a society drifting toward ethical numbness not through overt tyranny, but through apathy, misinformation, and the normalization of division.

This dynamic can be further illuminated through the concept of the "critical dystopia" developed by Tom Moylan in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (2000). Moylan argues that late twentieth-century dystopian narratives depart from the closed pessimism typical of earlier works by preserving what he calls a "utopian horizon" within oppressive social conditions (Moylan 2000, p. 198). Rather than presenting domination as total and inescapable, these texts maintain openings through which resistance,

solidarity, and alternative imaginaries remain conceivable. Moylan also emphasizes the reflexive quality of such narratives, drawing on the work of Cavalcanti (1999) to note that an important dimension of critical dystopia lies in its reflection on writing itself as “an act of hope,” since the text simultaneously articulates dystopian critique and utopian possibility, i.e., a tension that continues through the reader’s engagement with the narrative (Moylan 2000, p. 192). Although Smith’s *Quartet* is not conventionally categorized as dystopian, its narrative strategies resonate strongly with this model. The novels portray a political and cultural landscape marked by fragmentation and disillusionment, yet they also foreground the ethical and imaginative power of storytelling, art, and historical memory. In this sense, her work not only diagnoses the crises of the present but also performs, through its very form, the hopeful gesture Moylan identifies: the act of writing and reading as a space where critique and possibility coexist.

At the same time, the comparison reveals a decisive divergence since, whereas *Brave New World* offers a closed, pessimistic system in which resistance is either absorbed or extinguished, Smith’s fiction insists on permeability and renewal. Through intergenerational relationships, the recovery of marginalized histories, and the disruptive presence of art, the *Quartet* reframes dystopia as a condition to be confronted rather than a destiny to be endured. The tension between dystopian awareness and utopian possibility is therefore not resolved but sustained: Smith’s Britain appears fractured and often bleak, yet never entirely devoid of hope. By transforming Huxley’s dystopian legacy into a humanistic meditation on care, memory, and seasonal change, Smith ultimately reimagines the role of dystopian thought in the twenty-first century: not as a narrative of inevitability, but as an invitation to ethical attention and imaginative responsibility.

5. Conclusions

Huxley’s *Brave New World* and Smith’s *Seasonal Quartet* are separated by nearly a century. Yet, they are in profound dialogue with each other across time, genre, and political reality. Both bodies of work confront the erosion of individual agency, the manipulation of truth, and the suppression of historical consciousness; both interrogate how societies maintain control, not just through force, but through distraction, normalization, and the erosion of memory. Yet, while Huxley offers a dystopia defined by closure, irony, and despair, Smith offers a contemporary reimagining of the genre that makes space for care, renewal, and relational hope.

Huxley’s is a warning about a world in which pleasure has come to replace politics, and where critical thought has been both chemically and ideologically extinguished, producing a social order in which resistance is no longer simply suppressed but rendered almost unthinkable. Its power lies in its uncompromising clarity, offering a vision of the future in which all forms of opposition have already failed in advance and in which stability is maintained through the systematic management of desire and perception. But, as clairvoyant as *Brave New World* remains, its criticism is ultimately static, since the system it depicts remains intact and self-perpetuating, with the few who attempt to dissent being either silenced or exiled to the margins of the World State.

Smith, by contrast, writes in the wreckage Huxley imagined, but her project is forward-looking. The *Quartet* does not deny the dystopian conditions of the present; rather, it inhabits them fully, insisting on attention, art, and connection as ways of “staying with the trouble”. Through her cyclical structure, hybrid form, and emotionally complex characters, Smith retools the dystopian imagination for a new century, showing that while systems of control and forgetting persist, so too do gestures of resistance: small, local, unheroic, and radically human.

This repositioning of dystopia from structural fatalism to ethical engagement marks a significant shift in the genre. Smith does not imagine an alternative utopia beyond crisis but insists that possibility survives within it: in memory, in story, and in acts of care. If Huxley's great fear was that people would stop thinking, Smith's answer is that they must start feeling again, deeply and responsibly.

If *Brave New World* warns us of what we may become, the *Seasonal Quartet* asks us who we still might be.

Funding: This research has received funds from University of Palermo (U-GOV PJ_UTILE_2022_VQR_Misura_C_D19 Dipartimento di Scienze Umanistiche).

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: During the revision process of this study, the author used Deepl Translate for partial proofreading and language editing. The author has reviewed and edited the output and takes full responsibility for the content of this publication.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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