

Defining Utopia



What are utopia and dystopia? Here are two simple definitions: A **utopia** is an imaginary place, situated in a particular time and space, that is socially, morally, and politically *ideal*. A **dystopia** is an imaginary place, also situated in a particular time or place, but which is socially, morally, and politically *terrible*, a state in which people are dehumanized, oppressed, terrorized, or completely dominated.

The word “utopia” is derived from Greek roots *u* or *ou*, meaning “no, not” and *topos* meaning “place.” Thomas More (1478-1535) coined the word “utopia” in his book by that name (*Utopia*, 1516) as a pun on *eutopia*, or “good place”—so that *utopia* sounds like “good no-place.”

Brave New World is generally considered a utopian satire, or a dystopia. These two ways of describing the novel aren't synonymous; they're actually slightly different ways of describing Huxley's purpose. In either case, readers don't generally believe that the world the novel envisions is in any way superior to the one we live in now; but many people believe it accurately describes the tendencies inherent in our society today—that we are living through the birth of the brave new world.

The utopian writer is someone who closely examines his or her present society to determine its significant elements, and then asks: what if those significant elements were fully developed? How about if we try to extrapolate some of the significant elements of our society today—what would you say our culture seems to value most? Here's how my list looks: we value entertainment, wealth, status, material comfort, youth, “beauty” (in ironic quotes, because we define it so narrowly), and the latest technology. And what do we de-value? I have to agree with Huxley: art, history, morality, rationality, freedom, individuality, truth. I guess I'm one of those who agree with Huxley that the conditions for a Brave New World are ripe—and ripening more every passing year. Though that might seem depressing, it doesn't have to be. I just try to make what I feel are the necessary adjustments in my own life and leave society to take care of itself.

Let's look at the definition of "utopia" in more detail. Literary critic Northrop Frye defines utopia as an imaginative vision of the *telos* or end at which social life aims. The utopian writer, therefore, looks around at his or her present society, and observing its most significant elements, extrapolates a hypothetical outcome. That projection can have all the feeling of myth and metaphor—but a utopian story is always speculative rather than "true." We don't ask whether the utopian vision exists or not, by faith or otherwise; we recognize that it is fictive—idealistic rather than realistic. Frye points out how taking utopian vision literally has led to many a failed experimental community.

Ideologies can change as quickly and as radically as fashions; yesterday's utopia can seem like today's horror show. Furthermore, it should be understood that any utopian vision is a particular perspective that might appeal rosy to some while appearing dark and disturbing to others. One person's "utopia" may become another person's "dystopia." I'm sure Hitler and his comrades had a utopia in mind when they sought to create the Thousand Year Reich...but Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and other victims of his vision would beg to differ. Our idealistic (utopian?) insistence on "democracy in the Middle East," where we want to put "freedom on the march" may seem dystopian to tens of thousands of Arabs displaced and killed and still fighting against that cause. Our own "Declaration of Independence" is a utopian document that talks about man's "inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." But reasonable people would quickly admit that this is and has always been an unfulfilled vision, a pleasant, noble, idealistic dream more than an everyday reality in America. Read Langston Hughes' poem "Let America Be America Again" and see if you agree.

Generally, the utopian vision is one that that author intends readers to find considerably better than society as it presently exists; while the dystopian vision is one that the author intends for the reader to find considerably worse than the society as it presently exists.

An interesting semantic question: are "utopia" and "paradise" the same thing? "Dystopia" and "Hell"? I would say they aren't—"paradise" is a place that is meant to exist outside of time and space, in a no-time, no-space otherworld, but the "utopia," although hypothetical, is situated in recognizable time and space. One is mythic, the other fictive. Paradise has metaphorical truth, while utopia is far more literally fictive. Our literature abounds with both. Visions of paradise include the biblical Garden of Eden, Homer's Elysian Fields, Hesiod's "Golden Age," Virgil's Arcadia, Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights," the medieval lands of Cockaigne and Dante's *Paradiso* from the *Divine Comedy*. The paradise is a place of simplicity, security, immortality or easy death, unity, abundance without labor. These paradise worlds are gifts from the gods; they are sensual and social dreaming at its simplest. If paradise is a gift from the gods, the utopia is a human contrivance, and it's often cast in the form of that most human of places, the City. Plato's Republic and Lycurgus the Lawgiver of Sparta (described by the Greek historian Plutarch in *Plutarch's Lives*) are two of the earliest utopias in western literature; they are precursors to the formal

genre of utopian literature that Thomas More invented in 1516 with his book *Utopia*.

Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent, in their book *The Utopian Reader* (NYU Press, 1999), provide a succinct overview of the history of the utopian tradition in literature since More; it evolves in four recognizable stages: the “religious radicalism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries spawned a variety of egalitarian schemes in which communal property-holding, linked to Spartan ideals as well as Christian monasticism, was given a high priority. These are the strands that give rise to socialism in the nineteenth century” (p. 3). The age of discovery, the exploration of the New World that happened in the sixteenth century “encouraged heated debate over the virtues and vices of primitive peoples, their relation to pagan and Christian traditions of an original age of innocence, and the moral any such discussion held out for societies concerned that their increasing wealth threatened moral degeneration” (p. 3). The development of science and technology from the seventeenth century onward “began to hold out a promise of an indefinite progress of the human species toward better health, a longer life, and the domination of nature in the interests of humankind. Twentieth century science-fiction emerges as the characteristic genre expressing both the hopes and fears of our own era. The modern dystopia crystallizes the anxieties that increasingly accompanied the onward march of progress” (p. 3). The ideal of equality gains momentum in the revolutionary movements of the eighteenth century in the U.S. and France “in which the utopian promise of a society of greater virtue, equality, and social justice was now projected onto a national scale. This was matched by the transformation of socialism after 1848, in which the ethos of small-scale communitarianism was replaced by the ideal of centralized state socialism. Small-scale communitarianism was reflected in the establishment of many communes or intentional communities, groups of five or more adults and their children, if any, who come from more than one nuclear family and who have chosen to live together to enhance their shared values or for some other mutually agreed-upon purpose” (p. 3-4).

The *utopian satire* is a spin-off of the utopian tradition generally understood to be a criticism of the existing society. Most critics agree that *Brave New World* is a satiric work intended to criticize modern assumptions about science, technology, progress and the “individual” pursuit of happiness.