

Utopian / Dystopian Literature

Introduction / Overview

Utopia literally means “nowhere” and was derived from Greek roots. Thomas Moore coined the phrase in 1516 and titled his book “Utopia” which was about an imaginary island enjoying perfect legal, social, and political systems (etymonline.com). Today utopia has come to mean the ideal or perfect society and dystopia (from the writing of John Stuart Mill) means ‘bad society’.

For this unit, we will look at various forms of utopias and, more often, dystopias through a variety of different media and including classic and modern literature; film; graphic novels; essays; poetry; and music; as well as a range of time periods from ancient Greece to modern America, cultures, and gender.

We will analyze various utopias and dystopias for differences and similarities. We will determine what elements are routinely present within a utopia or dystopia and how they function and why they are present. We will look at how utopias and dystopias fit into society and what function they play.

Objectives

By the end of the unit, you should be able to:

1. identify utopian / dystopian literature.
2. describe and explain what elements are present in utopian / dystopian literature.
3. explain the difference and commonalities between utopian and dystopian literature.
4. understand, explain, and speculate about the purpose for utopian / dystopian literature and its function in our own and different societies and time periods.

Readings

- Selections from *Republic*, Plato
- Selections from *Candide*, Voltaire
- “The Lottery,” Shirley Jackson
- “Harrison Bergeron,” Kurt Vonnegut
- Poetry by Matt Ford

Literature

Each of you will read *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley

In addition, you will each read “The Lottery,” by Shirley Jackson and “Harrison Bergeron,” by Kurt Vonnegut “The Bead Woman”, Rachel Pollack

In addition, each of you will read one to two other novels and selections that come up.

Responses

Responses to the above readings will be due on the day that the reading is due. The responses should be at least one page (double spaced) and should reflect your reactions, thoughts, and conclusions about the readings. Responses can include what the readings made you feel and think about, things that the reading reminded you of, and, possibly, speculation about the world of the novel. Your responses can include almost anything except analysis. These responses are designed for you to write your thoughts down about the text and engage with the text. There is really no right or wrong responses (other than critical analysis.)

Other Texts / Materials

Other types of dystopian texts will be looked at throughout the semester. These texts will vary across media formats. Responses for these will not, typically, be required, but I may assign them. The other texts / materials will include:

- *Minority Report* (movie)
- “The Unforgiven”, Metallica
- “Man That You Fear”, Marilyn Manson
- *Jericho* (Television Series)
- *Batman Begins, The Dark Knight, V for Vendetta, Watchmen, Children of Men, The Matrix, Aeon Flux, Terminator Salvation, and Ultraviolet* (movie trailers)

Presentations

Besides the literature groups, presentation groups will be formed (six groups) along the same or different methods. These presentation groups will consist of different individuals than the literature groups. The purpose behind this alternate groupings is to acquaint in allow you to practice your group dynamic skills. There will be two different group presentations (12-15 minutes each), however, these presentations can be done consecutively, at different times, or can be intermingled—it will be the decision of the group as to how and in what order the presentations are given. Additionally, each student will give a 5 minute oral presentation to the class. Specifics of each presentation are as follows and official rubrics will be provided at a later date.

Presentation 1

The first group presentation (first only in the sense that I am writing it first, the actual order of the presentation does not matter) will require the groups to create their own idea of a utopia including political, societal, and legal traditions and norms as well as how people ought to behave and feel. Also, a fictional historical timeline will be created to show the utopia's development. This will be an in depth creation and will be given time in class to collaborate and work on the utopia. The presentation should provide an overview of your society's laws including constitutional or high law, customs, population (description, general age statistics, levels, etc.), governmental structure (democracy, oligarchy, monarchy, etc.), citizen rights, taboos, etc. Be specific and thorough and be sure to analyze the society for possible dystopian elements.

Presentation 2

The second group presentation will consist of an overview of what the group feels are the important elements of utopian / dystopian literature including common elements, its function and role in society, and its purposes and reasons. Basically, it will be an overview of your group's choice novel, reading selections, graphic novels and short stories and how they connected, compared, and contrasted to the required novels, required short stories, and required reading selections.

Presentation 3

Each student will give a presentation to the class following the conventions of public speech. During the presentation you will present an argument persuading the class to either eliminate an element of society (tradition, holiday, constitutional item, law, regulation, program, etc.) or add an element to society in an attempt to make a more utopian environment for Americans. Be sure to take into account dystopian consequences for what you decide that you want to add or eliminate and make an argument as to why we should still go ahead with your proposal. Your speech should be five minutes long and have a well organized structure and a clear argument that uses various persuasive techniques. Topic is per my approval.

Individual Writing Assignment

Each of you will create a short story. This will be your individual culmination of what you have learned about utopian / dystopian literature in the unit. The story should demonstrate your understanding of the elements of utopian / dystopian literature. It should also follow the conventions of the short story genre. Also, you should keep in mind the purpose that utopian / dystopian literature has in society while writing your stories. Alternatively, you may opt to create poetry; a short film; a television or movie concept, script, or screen play; a song; or (per parental approval) a component of or a video game. These alternative options are, of course, per my approval as well. A specific rubric for this assignment will be distributed at a later date.

In Class Writing / Assignments / Quizzes

After each assigned reading a short reading and vocabulary quiz will be given. The reading portion of the quiz will generally be quite easy if you've done the reading. The vocabulary

portion of the quiz might be difficult. I will select the words for the quiz from the assigned reading; however, you will not know what they are until the time of the quiz. This means that you will be responsible for looking up words that you do not know. This should be a priority for any adequate reader. If you cannot understand the words and do not know what they mean, then you cannot fully comprehend what you have read.

Additionally, there will be various in class writing and other assignments. Generally these will be due at the end of the class period. However, this is not set in stone and each assignment's due date may be extended based upon circumstances in class that day. Basically, if you work on the assignment during the time provided and still need more time, I will give it to you, but if you are not working and I notice it, I will not provide extended time. This is about responsibility.