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; music; and video games 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**

*(All readings are in your textbook or will be provided electronically or via handout.)*

Required Readings.

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

**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.)

**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 and over view 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.

**Participation**

I want you to participate in classroom and group activities and discussions. I do not believe in nor like to lecture. Yes, there will be a limited amount of lecturing because, sometimes, there is no other way (introduction of new information, background information, etc.), but it will be minimal. The crux of the class relies on your participation and using your voice to express your reactions and opinions. You need never feel that I will reprimand or chastise you for expressing your opinion. I will, however, often ask you why you feel that way or why or how you came to that conclusion. I want to know your thinking processes and I want you to use and expand those processes.