

Utopian and Dystopian Literature: a comparative study

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Abstract

“All utopias are dystopias. The term “dystopia” was coined by fools that believed a “utopia” can be functional.” A.E. Samaan

Literature, over the ages, has been influenced by the psychologies of people living in changing times. That is how literature is classified into various genres. The utopia and its derivative, the dystopia, are two such genres (opposite to each other) of literature that explore social and political structures. Where Utopian fiction portrays a setting that agrees with the author’s ethos and is portrayed as having various attributes that readers often find to be characteristic of that which they would like to implement in reality or utopia, as the setting for a novel. Whether in Dystopian fiction, the opposite is the portrayal of a setting that completely disagrees with the author’s ethos and is portrayed as having various attributes that readers often find to be characteristic of that which they would like to avoid in reality, or dystopia. Many novels combine both, often as a metaphor for the different directions humanity can explore, ending up with one of two possible futures. Both utopias and dystopias are commonly found in science fiction and other speculative fiction genres, and arguably are by definition a type of speculative fiction.

“Utopia” and “dystopia” are actually two sides of a coin. Generally, these picture a science fiction setting of two extreme points. Literature also explains the two in a more profound way. But by definition, “utopia” is a society or community setting wherein the people experience the ideal and most perfect life possible. There are nothing called rules; humanity is given full freedom to explore everything possible (except imperfections). By contrast, “dystopia” highlights the complete opposite, which is a place of extremely unpleasant living and working conditions for most people. Most or all of the societal and governmental systems are bad in a dystopia.

“Utopia” is what many would think as a paradise. The term was first coined by Thomas Moore in his official publication entitled “Utopia” back in 1516. In his utopia, he described an imaginary and solitary island where everything seems to be running smoothly. It’s like looking at blue skies, warm and bright sunlight, working in clean, spacious buildings, living with friendly individuals, going to work happily, and harmoniously coexisting with everyone. However, there’s a reason why many acknowledge a utopia as a pure work of fiction.

Keywords: utopia, dystopia, Thomas More, literature, fiction

Introduction

Since Thomas More's first use of the word utopia in 1516 it has conjured multiple and ambiguous connotations. Utopia and its defining antithesis dystopia can be articulations of what we wish to become or to avoid becoming, an investigation of hope and the potential for transformation. Utopias can evoke dichotomies between the liberal realisation and the impossible ideal (Kumar 1991); or a contrast between the concrete and closed social plan as opposed to the impetus toward hope in the small details of various cultural contexts.

Because utopia and dystopia are impossibly large concepts this edition of Social Alternatives does not argue for a common specific definition of either. This edition simply seeks to revisit the themes of utopia and dystopia. Firstly, it focuses on literary and cultural expressions of utopianism rather than practical or political expressions, although the literary becomes a vehicle for social and political change. Secondly, this issue deviates from focus on more typical utopian and dystopian genres such as Science Fiction (SF) to examine new contexts such as post-colonial fiction, American modernism, culture, young adult fiction, neo-Marxist aestheticism and hyperrealism. Oscar Wilde said 'Literature always anticipates life. It does not copy it, but moulds it to its purpose' (Wilde 1997, 25). As such, literature is a utopian focus whereby we can assess the potential for change through creative imagination.

The impetus toward hope and focus on the moment of utopian disruption provide a unifying lens through which to view the articles in this collection. This vision enables an escape from the popular imagining of utopia as 'unrealistic imaginings of improved world orders which when tested against the real politick of pragmatism collapse into ineffectuality' (Bradford et. al 2008, 2). As Peter Fitting has argued, the focus on the non specific utopian disruption can be 'frustrating [for] those readers looking for a solution or a particular strategy, who wonder how utopian disruption is meant to replace or supplement more traditional forms of political activity' (Fitting 2006, 49). Yet the political is implicit in all discussions in this edition. Fictional and cultural texts can offer political comment on various states of being in open ways, a 'social dreaming' (Tower Sargent in Bradford 2008, 2) where dreams and nightmares act as political examination and catalyst for change.

Utopian visions and concepts have been part of the Western (and in a lesser known degree Eastern) literary tradition ever since we can remember. Be it Cockaigne, land of plenty in medieval myth or Atlantis, a fictional island and lost land no longer attainable; El Dorado, the mythical city of gold or other myths such as the Fountain of Youth and Shangri-la, the permanently happy land isolated from the world. Not to mention the eschatological visions of Judeo-Christian and Islamic tradition. It seems inherent to human nature to dream of a better life and to conceptualize these dreams in model societies, set either in a past dreamland or in the future.

There are a few crucial characteristics that utopian literature exhibits: At heart utopian literature is social commentary, social criticism of what is and suggestion of what could be. The narrator of the story is an outsider to the utopian society who happens to find a secluded community or is in the need to found his own new community based on modern political, social, economic, or ethical principles. By extension, the very nature of utopia invites us to question the assumptions of our own society in the quest for a better world.

Objective:

This paper is an attempt to contrast utopian and dystopian world views. The argument is for a realistic goal for a modern society

Thomas More's Utopia

The history of what we call „utopia“ though necessarily begins with Thomas More. When the Lord Chancellor to Henry VIII of England described an ideal society in his work *Utopia* (1516) he thus provided an archetype for a whole new genre of writing. He coined the word ‘utopia’ from the Greek *ou-topos* meaning ‘no place’ or ‘nowhere’. Published as a counterpart to Erasmus of Rotterdam’s *In Praise of Folly* (1509) his philosophical dialogue describes the inhabitants of the island state of Utopia.

There is no private property, extensive equality, education is free. On the other hand all 54 cities are the same, all families are the same size, all citizens wear the same uniform; all as young or old, women or men have their firm place in the rigid patriarchal hierarchy, nobody aspires to do something special, new or different. On the island state, as the book designs, there is also slavery, and virtue guardians who supervise the whole. More gave the islander’s life certain early Christian and primitive communist practice for which he would later be dubbed the “father of utopian socialism”. No question, 500 years ago *Utopia* described some attractive sides as opposed to the feudalism of the time. However, anyone who appreciates modern liberalism, market economy or personal choices can only recognize a gloomy picture of Gleichschaltung in a totalitarian island-state, although it is formally a republic.

This area of conflict and the sometimes thin line between utopia and dystopia –it’s cataclysmic opposite- brings us to the heart of the matter: How would a perfect world look like? Are other forms of society possible? How can literature think the future? How do we want to live? And, no less important: How don’t we? Literature does not accurately depict reality one-to-one, but always opens spaces of opportunity and tells what might be different. This applies especially to utopian and dystopian literature.

Classic utopia: pure philosophy

In classic utopia the tension between the ideal and the real can be felt all over. Many of the depicted worlds are set outside history in a golden age, before time began or in a mythical time governed by its own rules. Plato’s *The Republic* (c. 380 BC) may be the most important predecessor of *Utopia*. Italian Dominican philosopher Thomas Campanella imagined a perfect society in which religion and reason work in total harmony, in *The City of the Sun* (1602). Another wellknown example is Sir Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1624), in which the common good is sought through learning and justice, especially through scientific knowledge. It describes the accidental discovery of a fortified city state, Bensalem, located in the Pacific Ocean. Following the same pattern of the previous examples, all aspects of human life and society are strictly regulated by the state and social engineering and education are proposed as means to eradicating the evils inherent to human nature.

Enlightenment, subgenres and political ideals

Eighteenth-century utopias made use of Enlightenment discourses on progress, perfectibility, reason, sociability and reform. At the same time, the projection of utopian hopes and desires onto the New World continued. There was a notion of America as utopia par excellence and those seeking social change began to believe that they had right and reason on their side when they embarked heading west and converted the principles of progress and individualism into reality. It was the times of American Independence and the French Revolution.

Voltaire's *Candide* (1759) stumbles upon a secluded and idyllic city in South America called El Dorado where everyone lives in harmony and equality. Daniel Defoe wrote *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Jonathan Swift wrote *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). Both owed much to More's *Utopia* – and both became far better known. Although “geographical or voyage utopia” of this period are akin to contemporary narratives of explorers, conquerors and merchants, they also projected archaic ideals of Paradise onto new worlds. Subgenres as the “Robinsonades” and feminist utopia evolve. The only known work of utopian fiction by a 17th Century woman, Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666) is a fanciful depiction of a satirical, utopian kingdom in another world that is free of war, religious division and unfair sexual discrimination and is the only place where true happiness, contentment and self-fulfillment can be ensured.

Early science fiction: Utopia gone wrong

In the nineteenth century, the utopian tradition continued to prosper in the guise of utopian socialism, communitarianism and the cooperative movement. At a time of massive industrial growth, utopian novels stated a growing emphasis on human rights, equality and democracy and became an established medium to popularize utopian political and economic principles. While well-known for his adventure stories, such as *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*, Jack London is also known for his early science fiction novels, most notably his 1906 dystopian novel, *The Iron Heel* (1907), portraying a socialist movement that overthrows the oligarchical elite. William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890) also further develops socialist ideals. As opposed to it, and having experienced the reality of communist totalitarianism, other works state a clear warning against its philosophy as Yevgeny Zamyatin in *We* (1921), a disquieting novel set in a dystopian future police state. The optimistic view of the future met its end at the beginning of the twentieth century, especially when the terrifying deeds throughout the two World Wars were perceived.

At the same time, applied science had a direct relation to the imaginary technical transformation in literature. The famously prolific H.G. Wells' most notable works of science fiction that include an utopian setting are *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899), *The Invisible Man* (1899), *The War of the Worlds* (1897) and *A Modern Utopia* (1905) and *The Time Machine* (1895). The latter develops the concept of echronia (“no-time”, in analogy to utopia as “no-where”), like Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888) in which the visitor to the utopia is going to a different time instead of a different place. In Wells' world, the time travel isn't mysterious or supernatural; it's a result of technology. However, the idea that technical development worsens the conditions of life is a central theme of the growing genre of dystopia.

The line between utopia, dystopia and science fiction is thin, as they are all closely and evidently connected by their interest in technological transformation. In an incredible anticipation of the cyberworld, E.M. Forster's depicts a future of alienated individuals bound to destruction in her short story *The Machine Stops* (1909). On the other hand we owe the introduction of the word "robot" to Karel Capek's play *RUR* (1921), in whose novel machines of flesh and blood can think for themselves and start a rebellion that leads to the destruction of the human race. Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871) is also a technologically supported Utopia. The protagonist finds a cast-away society of Vril, who live underneath the earth and have supernatural powers which eventually could enable them to exterminate humanity. Last but not least, Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), an anagram for "nowhere" (that is to say, utopia) is best known for its extended meditation on the possibility that machines might one day attain consciousness and take over human beings.

A variety of authors touch on the boundaries of other genres, such as Anatole France with his satirical novel *Penguin Island* (1908) that bears clear utopian traits. The clash of social classes as in Thea von Harbou's *Metropolis* (1925) was the basis for Fritz Lang's acclaimed homonymous film. Charlotte Perkins' *Herland* (1915) on the other hand describes an isolated society composed entirely of women fits in the tradition of early feminist literature. Alfred Kubin *The Other Side* (1909) adds the disturbing perspective of the subconscious. Author Ayn Rand is well-known for her libertarian novels. One of her earlier efforts, *Anthem* (1938), portrays a world where personality is discouraged to the point of death and where scientific achievement is seldom permitted. Among a cavalcade of pessimistic visions, Aldous Huxley's *Island* (1962) stands out as a utopian counterpart to his most famous work, *Brave New World* (1932) in which humanity continues through cloning, and individualism and free expression are rigorously controlled by the central authority. Together with George Orwell's *1984* (1949), who portrays a world population that have become victims of perpetual war, omnipresent government surveillance and propaganda, it is doubtlessly the most famous masterpiece of dystopian fiction.

Contemporary development of the genre

Today, 500 years after Thomas More, the social and literary discourse has shifted. Utopian fantasies of the future focus on subjects as artificial intelligence as in Frank Schätzing's *The Swarm* (2004), an apocalyptic novel where humanity is threatened by another intelligent lifeform on Earth. The deterioration of the environment is also a big theme voiced by John Brunner in *The Sheep Look Up* (1972), or by Sarah Crossan in *Breathe* (2012). Mike Davis' *City of Quartz* (1990), a (leftist) analysis of the societal designs and political forces that have shaped Los Angeles through the 20th century, is an excellent example of a novel that puts socio-political ideas and experiments at its center. On the other hand, there are outcasts who create parallel societies in an adverse, violent world. Newton Thornburg's *Valhalla* (1980) has many apocalyptic traits, as the protagonist tries to survive race war in a future, collapsed America. Same as in *The War Against Chaos* (1988), by Anita Mason, where anarchical communes try to survive on the fringes of a manipulative society. On the thin line between dystopia and post-apocalyptic thriller you will find *Arena 1* (2012), a highly popular sequel by best-selling Morgan Rice as well as Bethany Wiggins' trilogy *Stung* (2014).

We have known how totalitarian states suppress feelings at latest since 1984. The sense of living in an engineered and heartless world is the main theme of *Never let me go* (2005), in which Nobel laureate Kazuo Ishiguro designs a society where human clones are created to donate their organs. Quite in the same line go Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* (2011), whose main protagonist falls in love in a society where love is seen as a disease, and Scott Westerfeld with *Stupid Perfect World* (2012), a future-set novel set in a "perfect" world. When some teenagers have to experience old hardships such as as sleeping at night, as part of a school assignment they get to know an entire range of new emotions and start to wonder whether the old days were really as bad as they are being told.

Idealism has become a marginal phenomenon in the light of the technological achievements of Silicon Valley at the turn to the 21st century. We are constantly talking about scarcity of resources, financial speculation and environmental issues. One catastrophic report comes on top of another. Human nature, social reality and world history are and will remain complex and complicated. It is thus a desideratum of utopian literature to just as in prior times dare to think of literary alternatives and evoke a better future because, as Oscar Wilde sums it up, "progress is the realization of Utopias" (*The Soul of Man under Socialism*, 1891).

Dystopian Warning

This image of the vacuous and threatening mirror in the contemporary mainstream is literalised in Vivienne Muller's discussion of the dystopian potential of that servant to consumerism in the west: the changing room mirror. Muller points out that that consumer practice is complicit in the mirror acting as dystopian lens of female disassociation with the body. The change room mirror, as demonstrated by the prolificacy of blogs discussing its fragmenting and disassociating nature, is part of a mechanism whereby women define themselves against external and impossible perfection. When looking in the mirror, many women experience not a presence or identifiable corporeality, instead they see monstrous gap; an other to the female ideal overwhelmingly conjured by the media.

The common dystopian trope of monstrous unreal bodies and constant surveillance are alluded to in the bloggers' responses to the changing room mirror. But here the surveillance is negative self-surveillance and the monstrous body is a distortion of the self. Muller does not leave us with this dystopian mirror as inescapably hopeless. Muller explores a range of new mirrors used to evoke female agency and self-determination, such as use of the speculum in performance art.

Authors of the mid-20th century were the first to envision futuristic societies in which people lived in a repressive and controlled state that only from the outside resembled a Utopia. These dark visions of the future represent a great vehicle for the investigation of concepts such as individuality, freedom, class distinctions, repression, religion and advanced technology.

In the context of literature, the term dystopia, generally, connotes a scrupulous description of some country which runs on a certain system the author finds 'better' than any other possible means.

Some of the earliest and influential works of dystopian fiction can be contributed to the authors H.G. Wells (*Time Machine*), Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*) and George Orwell (*Nineteen Eighty-Four* or 1984). Their works paved the way to the numerous other authors, who even today manage to envision some new aspect of life in dystopian societies. In addition to the literature, dystopian themes found its life in many other types of mediums, such as comic books (most

notably V for Vendetta, Transmetropolitan, Y: The Last Man and Akira), music, video games (Fallout, Deus Ex, and BioShock) television series (The Prisoner)

Conclusion

In our modern environment, works of fiction that are focused on the futuristic visions of dark dystopias are common and widespread. These visions of futuristic worlds produced some of the most famous novels, movies, comics and music of our time. Numerous philosophers and authors imagined the dark visions of the future where totalitarian rulers governed the life of ordinary citizens. Their works explored many themes of dystopian societies – repressive social control systems, government coercion of citizens, influence of technology on human mind, coping mechanisms, individuality, freedom of life and speech, censorship, sexual repression, class distinctions, artificial life and human interaction with the nature (and often the consequences of its destruction). For example, you can look upon Tron Legacy, Terminator (series), Total Recall etc.

“I would love to change the world but they won’t give me the source code.”

Thus where utopia is an imagined community or society that possesses highly desirable or nearly perfect qualities. Dystopia is the vision of a bleak future.

To conclude, we can say that through dystopia, authors express their concerns about issues of humanity and society and warn the people about their weaknesses. Authors use dystopia as a literary technique to discuss the reality and depict issues that might happen in future. Thus the role of dystopia in literary works is to educate and give awareness to the audience in ‘a however’ negative way. Dystopias also serve as warnings about the current state of affairs of a government, or of those in power. In a dystopia, authors point out the wrong doings in a society or a system – the reason that it is often called a critique.

And no other than Stephen King has predicted long ago that:

“In the year 2025, the best men don’t run for president, they run for their lives. . . .”.

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