

Utopia is no place

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" It is the dream of a just society, which seems to haunt the human imagination ineradicably and in all ages" 1. But " absolute purity, absolute justice, absolute logic and perfection are beyond human achievement" 2. Composers such as More, Orwell, Huxley and Atwood use different avenues and techniques to explore this idea of perfection and its feasibility on earth with the human race.

Utopian and dystopian fiction comprises a broad selection of texts; but in the narrowest definition any text in which the composer proposes an ideal or nightmarish world or society. The literary canons of Utopian and Dystopian fiction include: Plato's Republic, Thomas More and his Utopia - responsible for both the generic name and genre creation; Aldous Huxley's Brave New World; George Orwell's 1984 and Animal Farm; And Margee Atwood's Handmaid's Tale. Within each text composers use different presentations of the 'ideal' society to highlight the achievability and desirability of perfection.

Utopia is a story, to be discovered only by trespassing onto an unknown voyage of exploration by Raphael Hythloday, More's fictional protagonist. Utopia is a " prototypical sociological and anthropological study" 3 into humanity.

In book II, More 'records' Raphael's account of life in Utopia as he 'experienced it'. He presents a prescriptive report of social structures of Utopia - contrasting it, in the minds of the responders, with his earlier discussions in Book I of the " sorry state of the realm of England". Utopia ends, first with a rousing flourish by Hythloday in which he claims Utopia to be the most perfect of societies, followed by More's assessment that many

Utopian policies are absurd, though there are some he would " like to see adopted in Europe" 4.

Utopia sits in the p between worldly pragmatism and philosophical idealism. It is a working society in which there is no evil, but the book can offer no means by which an existing society might be transformed into a Utopian model. Although Utopia is sceptical of aspects of the Utopian society it is still marked by the authors' faith in science, reason, and progress.

Later works of Utopian fiction saw a shift towards a more pessimistic and cynical view of man, generating the term dystopian fiction. This has become synonymous with 1984; Brave New World and Handmaids Tale.

1984 is " a utopia in the form of a novel" 5 - meaning like More's its inception is at a fantastical 'no place'. Orwell's Eurasia began with a vision of " a glittering antiseptic world of glass and steel and snow-white concrete" 6 but quickly turned to a totalitarian nightmarish state where even the freedom to say, " two plus two make four" corroded by the Party, where " War is Peace" " Freedom is Slavery" and " Ignorance is Strength"

Orwell presents a bleak picture of a society whose aim at perfection has completely eroded individual rights and freedom. A society where the state wields " power for power's sake" and truth and trust are a distant hallucination. The society is marked by fear of " vaporisation" and " un-person[ification]", where individual's movements and thoughts are constantly monitored and controlled by the Party.

He also uses the very powerful ending of the book with Winston's betrayal of Julia, as the final testament to human will. He shows us that "to talk about the need for perfection in man is to talk about the need for another species" 7 - that "perfection is not part of the human essence" 8

Orwell's negativity is paralleled by Huxley's *Brave New World*, a utopian future based on science and technology where forced conformity is exchanged with eugenics and hypnopaedia conditioning. Huxley uses his characters and plots as "purveyors of truth" reverberating his disillusionment with society and its values. His cynicism and profound pessimism of humanity "Human beings are given free will in order to choose between insanity on the one hand and lunacy on the other" is also widely reflected within the text.

His vision of 'perfection' sees the attrition of individuality for the sake of stability requiring the sacrifice of art, science, and religion. Individuality is not only repressed it's exterminated before and after birth through various forms of conditioning. He too, like Orwell, concludes his composition with a disquieting statement regarding human will, with John's submission to World State society leading to his suicide.

Atwood uses the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian and theocratic state, to also make a comment upon society's flaws. Dangerously low reproduction rate leads to a society with very definitive class distinctions - the elites, the Marthas and the handmaids - the vessels assigned to produce fruit for the infertile elites.

Atwood suggests, people will endure oppression willingly as long as they receive some slight amount of power or freedom - "truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations" and this passivity is the factor which enables the formation of totalitarian states. Again testifying to the limitations of the human character.

However Atwood unlike Orwell and Huxley moves towards a heterotopic state at the end of the novel with the protagonist being whisked away to the underground by Nick signifying remnants of hope for humanity.

Composers have often within their compositions addressed the human desire for perfection. But "numerous works of modern literature have been suspicious not only of the possibility of utopia, but of its very desirability" 9 By reflecting on "disastrous opposite" 10 resulting from trying to implement utopia on a grand scale composers have highlighted that "Perhaps the greatest utopia would be if we could all realize that no utopia is possible."