

Western society the concept of utopia



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Before starting my presentation on the ambiguous genre of “ utopian fiction” I feel it a necessity to provide my definition of what it actually means for a text to be utopian or dystopian, as often the context of the word determines its meaning. It is widely understood that the genre “ utopian fiction” encompasses the sub-genres of the utopian, eutopian, dystopian, anti-utopian, utopian satire, heterotopian, and cacotopian.

Though these are considered essentially the same there are subtle differences, which for our purpose we can thankfully afford to ignore. But it is important still to look at the two main branches that the genre has spawned – the Utopic and the Dystopic. The word Utopia, meaning “ not-place” (Greek: u – not; topos – place) was ingeniously chosen by Sir Thomas More as the location and name for his 16th century ‘ novel’ (the word ‘ novel’ is used in its loosest possible meaning in this instance), and since has been adopted not only as the generic name for a new feat in literature but also as a commonly used term in English. Utopia is colloquially taken to mean a ‘ perfect civilization’ or a ‘ perfect world’. Utopian literature following More’s example is often located on the foremost frontier of the unknown of the time. This follows the rationalisation that “ by jolting the reader into an unfamiliar environment, the author is able to trigger new and radical ideas in their mind” 2. Darko Suvin suggest that there are four essential elements in an utopian fiction: 1.

A setting or society removed from the influence of surrounding settings or societies; 2. The narrative must unfold in relation to, and in the sense of, the constraints posed by the isolated place; 3. A clear power relationship between the inhabitants of the utopia and those responsible for its creation

and/or maintenance; 4. The reader must be made to feel keenly the difference between his world and the world of the story. Examples of each can be seen in the stereotypical “ utopian” texts.

...In More’s Utopia, the story unfolds on an island or rather a peninsula carved into an island for the specific purpose of achieving isolation. There is also a very clear description of the hierarchy of Utopia given by More, which clearly identifies the political structure and maintenance. And the fourth point is far too obvious and hence doesn’t need any form of highlighting.

Ideas of isolation can also be seen in Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe in which utopia is achieved on an individual rather than collective basis. This utopia is however still only achieved through the complete isolation of Crusoe on an island off Trinidad. Again all the above also applies to the text except perhaps number three whose significance is less visible in the text. And since my knowledge of Utopian texts is so sparse I place my trust in Suvin that these elements are also identifiable in other utopian texts, which I’m yet to devour.

Dystopia is as its name suggests is in most instances taken as the direct opposite of Utopia, i. e. “ imperfect or nightmarish world” and is thought to be conjoined to the utopian genre. However many would argue otherwise as Dystopia itself can be refined into a number of semi-genres mainly cacotopia and anti-utopia. But for the purpose of my seminar we shall confine our selves with a singular genre - Dystopia.

Dystopias are “ narratives of an undesirable society, not specifically satirical of assumptions in utopian fiction” 3. Dystopias share many of the features of <https://assignbuster.com/western-society-the-concept-of-utopia/>

Utopias but their purpose in the genre is different. For example in dystopias:

1. The setting is isolated not to prevent interference from interlopers, but to prevent escape by the inmates. This can be distinctly seen in Orwell's 1984, Atwood's, Giljean of Handmaid's Tale, Heller's Pianosa in Catch 22, Huxley's Brave New World and others. 2.

The formal hierarchical system is not a benign ruling system, but an oppressive totalitarian state or economic force. Again all the above texts are valid but to me I think this point is best illustrated through 1984's famous phrase " freedom is slavery". 3. The reader is made to note the differences from his own society, but also the similarities. Religious fanaticism in Handmaid's Tale, Bureaucracy in Catch 22, Communism in Animal Farm and like before the list is almost endlessIt is important to remember " in matters of content, " utopia" and " dystopia" are two sides of the same issue.

Both are exercises in imagining coherent wholes, in making an idea work, either to lure the reader towards an ideal or drive the reader back from a nightmare" 4 which, depends solely on the position of the author. The flaw in utopian literature arises in that there is but a threadbare line between utopia and dystopia "[one's] ideal society [can] strike so many readers as dystopian." 5. Also more clearly than for other genres of writing, a historical space-time of a text's inception is required to be fully able to understand the finer and subtler points of the text. So a reader of Plato or More in the 21st century " is reading against a different horizon of experiences and values, which colours all" 1.

This is to me a fatal defect in Utopian literature: " born in history, inciding on history, they laicise eternity and demand to be judged in and by history" 1. But history itself is not a constant so the platform for judging Utopias is forever changing with the value of the present society. What this all means is that Utopias taken out of the narrow context of its origin becomes essentially a dystopia. So comes my central point - the values and ideals of our present society and their effect on the genre and ideas of utopia. It is undeniable that as a society we are progressing steadily towards a dystopia. The capitalistic world of today has little room for traditional utopian values of community, harmony, peace, unity, tolerance and other such ' unattainable' and ' undesirable' concepts.

In fact to the greater majority, communism, which is a predominant aspect of any utopia, is a horrible nightmare. " The imagination of the modern skeptic...it is much easier to visualize nightmares than dreams of the future.

" " Indeed, numerous works of modern literature have been suspicious not only of the possibility of utopia, but of its very desirability" 5The core of the utopian impulse is the assertion that a better society is possible and this is a fast fading idea in today's modern western capitalistic world. However the major reasons for the extinction of the idea of a utopia can be explained very simply using Suvin's four essential ingredients. 1. A setting or society removed from the influence of surrounding settings or societies; - this has become an impossibility in the world with humans having explored almost every corner of the earth's surface. It is still possible to create a fictitious isolated land undiscovered yet by humans but it cannot be done in the same manner as in Thomas More's Utopia and Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe,

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where new discoveries were still being made and the possibility of the existence of such a place was still an option. So the creation of such isolation on earth becomes unrealistic and with it the ideas in the text².

The narrative must unfold in relation to, and in the sense of, the constraints posed by the isolated place; - As stated above the isolation it self has become a thing of fiction, however even if our disbelief is suspended, and such a concept accepted there comes the impact of globalisation and the 'shrinking' world on our perceptions. With the recent burst of communication and the emergence of the one global culture it is undesired by people to shy away from the conveniences provided by such feats and thus disables an essential ingredient in creating a Utopia. 3. A clear power relationship between the inhabitants of the utopia and those responsible for its creation and/or maintenance- a benevolent, honest, caring, fair political body is today, a laughable idea held only by very small children and Americans. Thus a system such as the one presented in More's Utopia is a ludicrous if not fantastical idea that cannot be taken as any thing more than a joke⁴.

The reader must be made to feel keenly the difference between his world and the world of the story- this however is still very much a possible, although with the inability of an author to accomplish the above it is seemingly pointless. So what does all this mean? Well an idea from post-modernism is especially helpful in deciphering what it is exactly, that I'm trying to say ... " A texts unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.

" 6 It is not important what the author intended but how the reader " disentangles" the " multiplicity of writing." 6 Basically it does not matter

wether More intended to propose a Utopia, Dystopia or was completely drunk and belted out whatever wild drug induced images he saw, what is important is how you and I perceive the text. And this is what has killed Utopian fiction. We in our increasingly perverse society are incapable of imagining a collective utopia.

Perhaps this is a result of a mutation of an insignificant strand of DNA that determines positive thought or perhaps it is simply from going through life being weaned of phrases such as " life is not meant to be fair" " it's a dog eat dog world" " money makes the world go around" " its every man for him self" " survival of the fittest" need I go on. Or could it possibly be that mankind has actually learnt something from history... by seeing the tragic ending of man's attempt to create a utopia has realised that it is an unfeasible concept? Though this last prospect I'm skeptical about for obvious reasons.

Though I must admit that I don't fully believe in the statement that I made in the beginning. What I would like to add is that though as a genre Utopian fiction may be dead it has before dying lent a significant portion of its gene to another well known genre - Science Fiction. Science fiction has become the privileged locus of Utopian fiction in the 21st Century. " Utopian fiction is, today and retrospectively, both an independent aunt and a dependent daughter of SF. Strictly and precisely speaking, utopia is not a genre but the socio-political sub-genre of science fiction" 2. Again to gain a better understanding of why, we must take a brief glance at Suvin's ' four'.

.. space to us is what the earth was to man in More's time. Within the inconceivable vastness of space anything is conceivable and hence ideas of utopia still accomplishable.