

# Utopian Dreams and Dystopian Nightmares: An Overview of the Seemingly Opposite Societies

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## Abstract

Utopias and Dystopias are not literally opposites; they are the different dimensions of projecting the problems in a society. The dystopias aim at projecting the seamy side of the society which has not been experienced or predicted by the writers of a utopian living. The aim of the dystopian fiction is to highlight the effects in the existing system and therefore the dystopian novels aim to revamp the socio-political structure of the entire plot. When Thomas More wrote his work, *Utopia* in 1516, little did he expect that his dreams would be taken as the role model for a perfect society. One has to understand that the literal meaning of *Utopia* is, nowhere, which means he talks about a society which is nonexistent.

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More was a scholar, a religious leader, a diplomat and effective statesman, his writings of *Utopia* did not depict the foundations of a perfect society, it rather reflected the pitfalls and the loop holes in the Renaissance of England. One of the things which More highlighted in his *Utopia* is the ideal of communism where everyone dressed the same way and every house looked similar in structure, texture and elevation. A close reading of the text would only prove that the author wanted the English to reconsider their political and social connections with the other nations.

The cardinal problem with a Utopian text is that, the ideas of a perfect society are extremely relative. That's one of the reasons as to why many novels written after the publication of More's *Utopia* had many different stories to offer aiming at a perfect society. To begin with, *The Garden of Eden* is itself a utopian idea where life at the Eden is in perfect synchrony and harmony with the God. It's a place where the Gods, Angels and Man would live in perfect concord. *The Lost Horizon* by James Hilton talks about a fictional land near Tibet called Shangri-La where eternal youth is restored. No one in the novel would get into the problems of ageing until and unless he lives in Shangri-La. The moment, he steps out of the place, he is doomed to get old and die soon enough. *El Dorado*, a valley

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deep down in South America, is a place which is yet to be found. The place is known to have riches of Gold, Diamond and Rubies where the entire city is made of gold. To explore further, the myth of Holy Grail and its quest by King Arthur is also an example of Utopia where the grail symbolized fertility and prosperity.

When one considers the similarity in all the Utopias ever written, one finds that in order to achieve an ideal and a perfect society, it is necessary to sacrifice individual freedom so that a collective oneness can be achieved. A literary text is primarily written to expunge the emotional and societal confinement which has been around ever since a writer lived in a society. The said work of art is primarily written to question the lack of individual freedom which exists in a society. The writings of Utopian classics have a different ball game to play.

These novels reflect the very basic idea that human beings are essentially imperfect and therefore the idea of a perfect society can never be plausible. From Thomas More to any other writer who dreamt of writing a utopia either sacrificed individual freedom to achieve social order or gave up social order to attain the freedom of an individual. The basic tenet of the foundations of all Utopias is imagination. It is through the sense of imagination that a writer aims to bring forth the idea of progress and development in mankind. Historically, and even scientifically, there has been a constant evolution and change in the hearts and minds of human beings. The writers of literature try to sharpen their imaginations through the idea of progress and development. On the whole, every Utopia aims to look for an ideal place which does not exist but it still serves as a driving force to bring all human beings together into the realm of progress. Tim Waterman in his work, *The Landscape of Utopia* comments on the indispensable ideals of humanity and progress and says, Human beings and Human becoming should be directed towards development. Our task as humans, as sentient species is to overcome our worst instincts, our drives and strive towards a customary and an ethical relationship with each other and with the world..... Human life from the scale of individual to family and community is for a species which makes and builds a society which aims for conviviality. (4)

Dystopias or Anti Utopias are also a work of futuristic fiction which aim to warn the society about an upcoming danger. It is rather a tale of caution which aims to correct and mend human nature by telling them that the society might move to an Armageddon if it continues to progress the same way. The word dystopia kindles with the readers the sense of fear, negativity, dread and death. One is reminded of the floods, wrath of the Gods as a retribution, the Apocalypse as shown biblically through the Day of Judgment, wars, disease, lawlessness and destruction in the current society and all images of loss and despair which might exist if the society continues to take the same route of pessimism and disdain.

The archetypal beginnings of all dystopian societies aim at the creation of a new world after a war, an epidemic or any other natural or manmade calamity. To be more precise, a dystopia is a manifestation of human predicaments and worries which have resulted due to the broadening of

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disparity between the rich and the poor, it might be the worry created due to the resting of the power and regime in the hands of a select few who might turn into autocrats over a period of time, it could talk about the climatic and genetic changes which would in turn change the basic DNA of a human being. A lot of scientific and technological changes have affected, influenced and even impacted the lives of the human beings on earth as well as the entire eco system. These destructive changes are the result of human need as well as human greed. Every dystopian work aims to reflect two things. On the one hand it aims to warn the future society of destruction sooner or later. On the other hand, every dystopian work of art offers hope for betterment and correctives in the future. These novels drive home the oft repeated pithy statement, better late than never. Almost all the dystopian novels project, predict and prophesize a bleak and a nightmarish future into which the world has gotten into. It warns its readers of an immediate change which must be imminent. These fears are the reflections of societal and global destruction which have been the byproducts of scientific and technological progress. Louisa Mackay Demerjian in his work, *The Age of Dystopia* comments on the origins of dystopian genres and says,

The nineteenth and the twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and communicable experience. Under the general demand of the slackening and appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of desire for the return of the terror for the realization of fantasy to seize reality. (8)

After the scientific inventions, the influence of technological progress, the world of the twentieth century began to reflect more problems than it could solve. The dystopian narratives which took shape were largely the reflections of fear factors which mulled over the modernization during the fag end of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries put together. The issues like repressed governance, genocides, famine, constant wars, depression and so many other factors gave rise to imaginary societies of future which had the tale of woe to tell the readers with a tinge of warning. To be more precise, all the dystopias are against the advancements and developments in science and want to go back to the roots where there was eternal peace and social order around the world. The dystopian narratives began where the society is much worse than what has been lived or imagined at present. The fears of the present are extrapolated and projected into the far future with more macabre and morbid ambiances.

The most notorious dystopia is the one by Zamyatin where the author creates an arithmetically perfect society which aims to impart collectivism by assigning the idea of social togetherness. The author imagines a walled society in the novel where the men are given odd numbers and women given even numbers as their names. The ruler of the imagined futuristic society is ruled by the Benefactor who is omnipresent. The novel aims to drive home the attitude of conformity and aims to create a society which would be devoid of any emotional or familial ties. The other famous work by George Orwell is *1984*, the work published in the year 1948 had its years reversed to 1984 where

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he aims to depict a futuristic England who is ruled by the Big Brother. Orwell gave England, a fictional name, Oceania and described the intensity of autocratic leadership influenced by Stalinist Russia. Tom Moylan in his work, *Science Fiction, Utopia and Dystopia* comments on the systems of dystopian governance as

It is true that the most revealing indexes to the anxieties of our age is the great flood of works like, Zamyatin's *We*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Orwell's *1984*. Appaling in their similarity, they describe nightmare states where men are conditioned to obedience, freedom is eliminated and individuality crushed, where past is systematically destroyed and men are isolated from nature. Science and Technology are employed not to enrich human life but to maintain the state's control and surveillance of its slave citizens. (45)

Aldus Huxley created his *Brave New World* as a consequence of genetic engineering. In his futuristic society, there would be a five tier caste system which would comprise Alphas, followed by the Betas, then the Gammas, the Deltas come next and finally the epsilons come at last. There is no God or religion in the novel, all the history and religion have now become obsolete where the typical Oh Lord has been replaced by Oh Ford. Huxley wanted to name his society thanking the invention of T model cars of Henry Ford. All the citizens are drugged all the time with Soma, a drug which keeps them in a state of hallucination.

All the works of Utopia and Dystopia do not clearly come under the category of Science Fiction because, all these works do not essentially deal with the elements of robotics and cyber punk. These novels are aimed to reflect the nightmares of the society and aim to warn the world about the dangers of technological progress. On the whole, these genres are the offshoot of what one calls as a speculative fiction. Both the Utopias and the Dystopias aim at the corrective dimension of the society because both the genres feel that the current society is not right and therefore write to fix its problems. The novels are set in the future but always focus not on the actions of the future but rather the actions of technological progress and its hazardous impacts on the society of tomorrow. In Utopian societies perfection is uneventful and similarly dystopian societies project life which is horrific and dangerous. All these writings have a very common thread rope, these works of art aim to reflect the central idea of what if ? which is, what would happen if the society and its people are affected by horrors of destruction or dreams of perfection ? both the genres aim to answer these questions in a more refined and a feasible manner with great heights of imaginations.

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