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Utopian Literature from the Sixteenth Century to Present Day

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UTOPAIN LITERATURE

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Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, and George Orwell's *1984* are all works of utopian literature. Although they were written during different time periods, the issues they explore are remarkably similar. My research project explores such ideas as literature, sex and reproduction, society, and family life in these utopian works in order to demonstrate these affinities.

Thomas More coined the word *utopia*, deriving it from Greek words meaning *no place*. The word is used to express the idea of a perfect place, which cannot exist. This is important because most utopian novels are satire and designed to demonstrate the flaws in modern societies. Another word used to describe this idea is *dystopia*, an imperfect society. Utopian novels have been written during a variety of time periods, in different parts of the world, and for different audiences, but there are many similarities between the novels. This project analyzes common themes of utopian literature and how each society addresses these issues, which include books and literature, sex and reproduction, family and social life. The books under examination are Thomas More's *Utopia*, Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, and George Orwell's *1984*.

The first utopian society was created by Sir Thomas More and presented in his book *Utopia*, which was written in 1516 in England. In regards to literature, everyone in this society has complete access to all of the books within the community. The citizens are exceptionally industrious; built into the daily schedule are "periods devoted to intellectual activity" in which they "are tireless" (More 57). Sexual relations are strictly prohibited prior to marriage, "premarital intercourse, if discovered and proved, brings severe punishment to both man and woman, and the guilty parties are forbidden to marry during their whole lives" (More 60). There are also pre-marriage rituals that the couple must undergo to ensure the chastity of both individuals. The living situation in this society consists primarily of the nuclear family, although it is not uncommon for older relatives to be part of the household. To maintain social stability and moral integrity, "they allow divorce only very reluctantly" and "punish adulterers with the strictest form of slavery" (More 62). Families are assigned houses by the government and move on a regular basis, to prevent sentimental attachments and/or excessive damage to any given housing unit.

Lois Lowry's *The Giver* was written in 1993 and is directed towards children. Lowry presents a society that aims to prevent change and differences between people because these things are sources of awkwardness and/or suffering, thus their society "is all the same, always" (Lowry 97). No one is allowed independent thought because the government "[doesn't] dare to let people make choices of their own ... [they] have to protect people from wrong choices" (Lowry 98-9). The only books available are rule books, all other books are locked up in the possession of the Giver; no one is even aware that these books exist. The restricted access to books is to prevent anyone in the society from experiencing the emotions that are contained within the books. This includes both pain as well as joy; they "didn't want the pain" (Lowry 121), but with that they sacrificed change and choice which made life "so orderly, so predictable--so painless" (Lowry 103). This is the society's ultimate goal and why it was initially formed. Citizens of a certain age take a daily pill to circumvent experiencing any sexual feelings. No one in the society partakes in sex, even the breeding women are fertilized artificially, but this is not discussed. These measures are taken to prevent any emotional pain or trauma to the citizens. The family is strictly nuclear; aunts, uncles, grandparents, and/or cousins do not exist. An individual must apply for a spouse, which is also chosen for him/her. The couple then may apply for children, and children are chosen for the couple. When the children leave home, the parents are "no longer needed to create family units ... [they] go to live with the Childless Adults" (Lowry 102) and the children never see their parents again. Jobs are chosen for individuals after careful observation. There are no choices open to the citizens of this society.

Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury is a futuristic American society that hits very close to home even though it was written in 1953. In this dystopian novel the goal of the government is to prevent social unrest by eliminating intellectuals. In the novel, “the word ‘intellectual,’ of course, became the swear word it deserved to be” (Bradbury 58). Schools become vocational colleges and all spare time is devoted to hedonistic pleasure seeking. The government did not ban books; the people took it upon themselves to hunt down those who possessed books and burn both the books and their owners. Firemen “were given the new job, as custodians of our peace of mind, the focus of our understandable and rightful dread of being inferior: official censors, judges, and executors” (Bradbury 58-9). Education is rudimentary and geared towards preparing students for a specific job; the liberal arts are abandoned. The government no longer wanted the citizens to be aware of its activities and the prohibition of books effectively destroyed any political interest the citizens might have had. The government also believed that “If you don’t want a man unhappy politically, don’t give him two sides to a question to worry him: give him one” (Bradbury 61). Ultimately, the government wanted the citizens to “forget there is such a thing as war” (Bradbury 61). This society revolves around non-intellectual pleasure, which is used to distract the people from the government’s actions. Sex is mentioned surprisingly little for such a pleasure-oriented society. However, it appears that the modern mores and norms of present day America apply to this society in regards to sex; there are no strict rules regarding family life.

Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* is an alternative view of England written in 1932. It portrays a society that is trained through hypnotic conditioning methods and placated into a satisfied stupor through mind-altering drugs. The community operates on the belief that the secret to happiness is “liking what you’ve got to do. All conditioning aims at that: making people like their unescapable social destiny” (Huxley 16). All literature prior to the creation of this society has been destroyed; should any existing reading material be discovered, it is strictly “prohibited” (Huxley 218) and its owners punished. There is a department that produces the news, poetry, and songs for the citizens to enjoy, but these are stiff, cheap imitations of real literature. Reading is discouraged because it is a solitary activity and the society stresses social interaction at all times. Sex is a key part of this society, if one does not have sex frequently enough or with enough range of people one is considered defective. Any and all physical contact is acceptable and encouraged, even in public. The women are conditioned into using several methods of contraception that are part of a pre-intercourse ritual. Conditioning is so intense and thorough for all citizens that “they practically can’t help but behaving as they ought to” (Huxley 220). Reproduction takes place in machines and factories where embryos receive varying levels of care and nourishment depending on which part of society they are destined. Children are raised in conditioning centers by a group of workers; the idea of “family” is non-existent. All citizens live in their own private apartment, but they entertain guests frequently because of various social requirements.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s 1915 novel, *Herland*, describes a community of women who had gained the ability to procreate without cross-fertilization. In this society every person has complete access to every scrap of writing and/or knowledge that the community possesses. Education is highly valued and the citizens are strongly encouraged to pursue any study that interests them. The population as a whole understands many subjects “to such fullness of knowledge as made us [the main characters] feel like schoolchildren” (Gilman 55). Not only are the women exceptionally intelligent, they are also “profound educators” (Gilman 68) in their own right. Sex is a non-existent issue in this particular society because the women miraculously

began reproducing without any outside influence. This allows for easy population management, as the pregnancies are normal aside from the conception method. Everyone is employed in the maintenance of the living compounds. These tasks range from tending the fruit trees to caring for the children, which is “the *raison d’être* in this country” (Gilman 44). Anyone may train for new employment and subsequently perform whichever job they wish. Each member of society is involved in nearly everything; there are neither limitations nor secrets. Living is communal, although each woman has her own quarters.

Written in 1921, Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* presents a highly structured society with rigorous schedules provided for each citizen. A distinctive aspect of this community is that none of its members consider themselves to be individuals, only part of a greater cohesive whole, “nobody is ‘one,’ but ‘one of’” (Zamyatin 7). The head of the government is a mysterious individual called “the Benefactor.” He is the sole instigator of change in this community. He commissions all books and controls the only newspaper. These forms of literature possess little creativity or originality. Imagination is considered to be “a worm that gnaws out black lines on the forehead. It is a fever that drives you to escape farther, even if this ‘farther’ begins where happiness ends. This is the last barricade on our way to happiness” (Zamyatin 180). The conditions in this novel regarding literature are similar to those in *Brave New World*. The main character relates literature to dance: “Why is dance beautiful? Answer: because it is *unfree* motion, because the whole profound meaning of dance lies precisely in absolute, esthetic subordination, in ideal unfreedom” (Zamyatin 4). These two novels have similarities in each theme, as the citizens in *We* are also required to have a certain amount of sex, which is recorded through a ticket system. Members of this community also live in individual apartments, but these have glass walls and the only time there is any degree of privacy is during sex, when they are allowed to close the blinds. Family life is also non-existent in this novel, and social life is severely regimented, and “friends” are all but assigned.

George Orwell’s classic, *1984*, was written in 1949. The living conditions portrayed in this novel are arguably the worst out of all the novels that have been examined, as the most basic of goods are not readily available, and the apartments in which the citizens live suffer extensive disrepair. This novel is similar to *Brave New World* and *We* in that there is a great deal of reading material, but all of it has been fabricated or dramatically altered by the government: “In no public or private utterance was it ever admitted that the three powers had at any time been grouped along different lines” (Orwell 31). A unique aspect of Orwell’s novel is that the changes to the body of literature are ongoing; every time the government changes its position on a topic, or switches sides in the war, anything that was ever written and/or archived is destroyed and rewritten in accordance to the new policies and attitudes. This creates an endless cycle of rewriting and destroying out of date documents. Sex is outlawed because it leads to love and affection for someone other than Big Brother, which is illegal. The Party wants “Sexual intercourse to be looked on as a slightly disgusting minor operation,” thus “remov[ing] all pleasure from the sexual act” (Orwell 57). There is even an Anti-Sex League which advocates abstinence. However, the government is “inclined to encourage prostitution, as an outlet for instincts which could not be altogether suppressed. Mere debauchery did not matter” (Orwell 57). Families are instruments of the government, whose only purpose “was to beget children for the service of the Party” (Orwell 57). Through various youth groups the children have all been recruited as government spies. These children frequently report against their parents and neighbors, and are then praised as heroes by the Party.

All of these novels are satirical utopias in that they are attempts at creating perfect societies, but are designed to ultimately fail, making them dystopias. Each addresses the common themes in its own way. Some of the novels, More's *Utopia*, Gilman's *Herland*, and Lowry's *The Giver*, appear to be benevolent societies but upon further inspection fall short of ideal. Conversely Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, Zamyatin's *We*, and Orwell's *1984* are overtly dystopian in nature. The primary ways in which all of these fail is demonstrated in the examination of their treatment of books and literature, sex and reproduction, and family and social life. These novels and their treatment of the previously mentioned themes are a call to recognize flaws within one's own society and to take steps to remedy the situation.

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