

The Island Topos: From Paradise to Prison

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the transformation of the island topos. The island is frequently depicted as a paradise and prison in English literature and the article elaborates on the transformation of the two topoi. Prior to the depiction of the transformation, the article deals with perceptions and attitudes people have associated with islands throughout history. The core part of the article describes the process of the island transformation. It also points out the significant geographical features of islands which help to change the perception of the environment. Works by English authors such as, The Magus, Utopia, Web, Robinson Crusoe and Gulliver's Travels are used in order to help illustrate the processes of this transformation.

KEYWORDS

Island, poetics of place, topos, John Wyndham

Islands hold a special place in the human mind. People have tended to associate islands with different motives throughout the centuries. They were seen as a symbol of perfection in ancient Greece due to their geographical features as they are cut off from the mainland and therefore are not negatively influenced by it. This led to the creation of the two main motives people associate with islands. Island as a paradise and a prison. During the course of time, shipwrecked sailors saw islands as their prison, whereas ancient Greeks, colonists and utopian societies saw islands as paradises. However, often the paradisiacal island became a prison for them. These two perceptions are common in English literature dealing with islands because the English belong to an insular culture. It is not a coincidence that “English refer to Europe as the ‘Continent.’”¹ An island is a place of transformation. It offers people and characters in books a way to experience the transformation from paradise to prison without even noticing it. This magical place makes people think and act differently from how they would normally act. English literature is rich in such island transformations. This particular shift or change can be seen in *Lord of the Flies* where innocent children turn into brutal savages and start killing each other. Another illustrative example of this transformation is an island called Phraxos from John Fowles's *The Magus*. The main character thinks of this Greek island as a paradise, but in fact, it becomes a prison for him. The transformation of paradisiacal islands into prisons is what makes them so unique. The character is often put on an island that resembles paradise which in fact turns out to be the exact opposite. The vision of a perfect place, which can be found on an island, is embedded in people's minds and such clichés offer an interesting opportunity to create the transformation from one topos to another. This article will try to illustrate and elaborate on the transformation of the two aforementioned topoi.

The island transformation from paradise to prison begins at a moment when the characters know that there is no other way back. It can be defined as the feeling of anxiety, aloneness and isolation. All of these feelings are closely related to a prison and create the prison-like feeling. In island-like literature the feeling creeps over people that are cut from

1 Stephanos Stephanides and Susan Bassnett, “Islands, Literature, and Cultural Translatability,” *Transtext(e)s Transcultures Special issue* (2008): 7, accessed February 3, 2017, <https://transtexts.revues.org/212>.

the mainland. An island is an enclosed space which often functions as a place of change. The prison-like feeling is created among shipwrecked sailors, utopian societies and explorers. For example, the well-known island in *Utopia* by Thomas More was considered as a perfect place at that time. Lyman Sargent, the author of *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction* supports this claim by saying, “[t]hus, to many in the 16th century, Utopia would have seemed like paradise.”² In fact, the island of Utopia gradually transformed itself into a prison for its citizens.

The utopian societies are closely related to both island perceptions. The societies believed they could build something extraordinary with paradisiacal means that has been in the past such as the Biblical gardens of Eden. Yet it is focused on the future, to create that wishful Eden again. Sargent supports this argument by saying, “[i]mages of the utopian past (Eden) and the utopian future [...] relate to both this world and the next one.”³ The architects of the utopian societies believed in their ideal societies and possibly in their own paradises. Islands were perceived as ideal places because they are not geographically connected to the mainland and therefore they maintained their pure and untouched state. Such isolated and remote places are the best choice when wanting to establish a society with its own rules. Islands were a symbol of perfection, virginity and purity throughout history. Yi-Fu Tuan elaborates on the island perception. He claims that an island “symbolizes a state of prelapsarian innocence and bliss, quarantined by the sea from the ills of the continent.”⁴ This applied especially for the ancient Greeks because they belonged to an insular culture. Many island motives and perceptions first appeared in their literature.

In ancient Greece, people believed in mythical islands such as Delos, Atlantis and Thule, and the island myths were fuelled by works in Greek literature such as *The Odyssey*.⁵ For Greeks, “islands were anchors of security or oases of life in the ocean waters.”⁶ Kenneth Olwig gives an example of the mentality of the ancient Greeks by saying, “Odysseus would probably have asked an average ancient Greek stranger [...], ‘What city-state/island (in the wine dark sea) are you from?’”⁷ Olwig tries to demonstrate the fact that only an island can be the acceptable answer since islands provided Greeks with security, food and their haven. Due to the frequent usage of islands in Greek literature they became mythologized. The mythologization of islands in literature was due to the belief that islands were a place where Cyclopes lived but also where heroes led easy-going lives.⁸ Islands were and are Janus-faced, as they represent pleasure in the form of paradise and damnation as prison. These island associations led Greeks and other cultures to think of islands as ideal places for living.

The author of *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* Yi-Fu Tuan claims, that the ideal island was called the Island of the Blessed, which firstly appeared in archaic Greek literature.⁹ Sargent supports Tuan’s claim and combines this idea of an early myth

2 Lyman T. Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 23.

3 Sargent, *Utopianism*, 86.

4 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 120.

5 Stephanides and Bassnett, “Islands, Literature, and Cultural Translatability,” 8.

6 Tuan, *Topophilia*, 118.

7 Kenneth R. Olwig, “Are Islanders Insular? a Personal View,” *Geographical Review* 97, no. 2 (2007): 179.

8 Tuan, *Topophilia*, 121.

9 Tuan, *Topophilia*, 118.

with utopianism and says, “[t]he most influential of these early myths are creation myths like the golden age and earthly paradise and myths of the afterlife like the Island of the Blest, where heroes go after death.”¹⁰ The Celtic legends talk similarly about a “Celtic island on which no one toiled, its climate was exquisite, its air steeped in fragrance.”¹¹ The island perception as a paradise was shared transculturally as both the Greek Island of the Blessed and the mythical Celtic islands seem to be similarly interpreted. It is noteworthy, that both cultures shared the same idea of an ideal place, despite being separated by hundreds of kilometres. These island perceptions also persisted in the Middle Ages.

People began to enthusiastically search for the biblical Eden and paradisiacal islands in the Middle Ages. New territories and islands were being discovered and new legends of paradisiacal islands arose. These islands were considered to be fertile with an extraordinary climate. An island described in this way was supposedly found by a man, who was respected by Columbus, Pierre d’Ailly in the 13th century.¹² The fascination with paradisiacal islands continued and was held by Ponce de Leon who “was reported to have searched for the Fountain of Youth in Florida, [...] by thinking of Florida as an island.”¹³ Ponce de Leon apparently believed that only an island can be a perfect place due to its pure, virgin and untouched state. People were affected by such accounts. Melanie Murray, the author of *Island Paradise: The Myth: An Examination of Contemporary Caribbean and Sri Lankan Writing* describes the way that colonization changed the notion of islands, “[t]he notion of paradise is traced from a religious context to that of economics as the search for paradise changes from a religious quest to a search for gold.”¹⁴ Islands were considered as places where people could find treasures and gold as in *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson. Accounts from sea voyages and explorers boosted the desire in people to go and search for Eden. This led to colonization of foreign lands and islands.

Colonization accelerated during the Renaissance. This led to the creation of new island themes such as Edenic, arcadian and utopian. The most significant works from this time period are More’s *Utopia* and Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*.¹⁵ People began to colonize new territories around the world and islands became the places which were idealized by sailors and colonists. Islands were still seen as paradises and books about them only encouraged more people to search for them. Lyman Sargent highlights the main purposes of the colonists and says, “Europeans established two types of colonies. One was designed primarily to exploit the labour of the inhabitants and the natural resources of the country. [...] The second, [...] was primarily for settlement.”¹⁶ The colonists inhabited new islands which caused problems in their paradises. They interfered with the natives and savages already living on their islands. This was another factor which boosted

10 Sargent, *Utopianism*, 13.

11 Tuan, *Topophilia*, 119.

12 Tuan, *Topophilia*, 119.

13 Tuan, *Topophilia*, 119.

14 Melanie A. Murray, *Island Paradise: The Myth: An Examination of Contemporary Caribbean and Sri Lankan Writing* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), XV.

15 Stephanides and Bassnett, “Islands, Literature, and Cultural Translatability,” 12.

16 Lyman T. Sargent, “Colonial and Postcolonial Utopias,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 200.

the island-like literature. Stephanos Stephanides and Susan Bassnett claim in their essay that “[i]slands are often represented as sites of some kind of magical transaction or exchange, places where individuals encounter different cultures and find that they can no longer relate in the same way to the places they have left.”¹⁷ The settlers saw paradises in islands and wanted to stay there due to the embedded images of the paradise. Lyman Sargent adds, “[b]ut the dreams of the settlers clashed with the expectation of the people already living in these countries and generally produced actual dystopias for them.”¹⁸ The clash of cultures resulted in oppression of the native cultures and their eventual eviction. Daniel Defoe used savages in his *Robinson Crusoe* and described them as cannibals. Robinson watches the cannibals and writes in his diary, “[t]his was a dreadful sight to me [...] I could see the marks of horror which the dismal work they had been about left behind it, viz. the blood, the bones, and part of the flesh of humane bodies.”¹⁹ It is very likely that Defoe saw islands as places where cannibals lived. Stephanides and Bassnett in their article note that “islands are also repositories of fearful elements: accounts of voyages to the Caribbean, for example, abound in fantasies about cannibals.”²⁰

The colonists and utopian societies had to deal with the island’s original inhabitants which resulted in revolts, evictions and natives cursing the islands as in John Wyndham’s *Web*. Being far away from their homeland, the colonists and explorers often had to fight the natives which created the island-like feelings of isolation, aloneness and anxiety. This led to the creation of the island-as-a-prison perception. Such island notions became popular and books like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver’s Travels*, where the main character is imprisoned on an island, gained popularity.

As mentioned above, the first perception of an island is paradise. This stereotype is very common in English literature. People are often tempted to imagine islands as paradises due to constant exposure to literature, television and other media. Claudia Bell and John Lyall support this argument by claiming that “[n]atural landmarks [...] have been photographed from every angle and under every condition to titillate a tourist’ appetite.”²¹ People create their own image of an island and usually it is the one with beautiful white beaches. This is due to the fact that a beach is the first thing one comes into contact with when arriving on an island. They may denote security or adventure.²² Yi-Fu Tuan argues that seashores were probably the first human habitats and rhetorically raises a question, “[c]ould it be that our earliest home was a sort of Eden located near a lake or a sea?”²³ This might be one of the reasons why people associate paradisiacal islands with beautiful white beaches and are so intrigued by them. The authors Bell and Lyall also argue that “[b]eing physically present is the only way to experience such a sense.”²⁴ The images of an

17 Stephanides and Bassnett, “Islands, Literature, and Cultural Translatability,” 13.

18 Sargent, *Utopianism*, 51.

19 Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (London: David Campbell, 1992), 154.

20 Stephanides and Bassnett, “Islands, Literature, and Cultural Translatability,” 6.

21 Claudia Bell and John Lyall, *The Accelerated Sublime: Landscape, Tourism, and Identity* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 16.

22 Tuan, *Topophilia*, 115.

23 Tuan, *Topophilia*, 115.

24 Bell and Lyall, *The Accelerated Sublime*, 16.

island are often distorted when a person is physically present on it. The position of a person or a character in a book in a certain place, helps one to imagine and perceive it in a different way.

When being physically present in a place, it is very likely that a person perceives the place in a different way from his or her previous perception. Tuan claims that “[p]lace may be said to have ‘spirit’ or ‘personality’, but only human beings have a sense of place. People show their sense of place when they apply their moral and aesthetic discernment to sites and locations.”²⁵ This sense of place is demonstrated by John Wyndham in his *Web*, in which he depicted this radical change of place perception. The utopian group lands on an island and Arnold, the main character, describes the atmosphere as follows:

[i]t was remarkable how palpable that feeling of being on our own became. As long as the ship had been anchored in the lagoon we were linked with the outside world, but as she [the ship] disappeared below the horizon the sense of isolation closed in. Everybody, even the children, felt it. We found ourselves looking at one another speculatively as if seeing ourselves afresh, with the reality of the situation only now coming home to us.²⁶

The group of people perceives the place as some kind of an isolated place right after they land. It may be considered as the beginning of the prison-like feeling. Tuan calls this group experience of a place intersubjectivity.²⁷ This term means, “spatial experience that is defined by the presence of other people.”²⁸ The experience of a whole group is likely to be similar or the same, from the experience of an individual.

Personal experience, sense of place and the mythologization of islands led authors such as John Fowles, John Wyndham and William Golding to use a paradisiacal island in their books whilst transforming it into a prison. John Gillis, the author of the article “Island Sojourns”, makes a comment on this fascination and claims that islands were mythologised in Western cultures and that they were associated with heroic journeys and imaginative realms of magical transformation.²⁹ The concept of a magical place may be seen in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. The main character visits different islands which are distinctive in their inhabitants. Most of the visited islands became Gulliver’s prison. The fascination with a paradisiacal island is apparent in English literature such as in *The Magus*, *Web*, and *Lord of the Flies*. Usually, the characters enjoyed their time on an island due to its pleasant environment. The escapism, isolation and purity which an island can offer is what makes an island a paradise. People often tried to escape from the reality of the everyday world and islands were one of the few places where they could go.

Melanie Murray supports the idea of escapism and that colonists idealized islands. She claims that “[t]he island as an idyllic space ideologically provided solutions to problems at home in England. These island fictions are pertinent to colonial ideology.”³⁰ Islands offered

25 Yi-Fu Tuan, “Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective,” in *Philosophy in Geography*, ed. Stephen Gale and Gunnar Olsson (Dordrecht, Holland: Reidel, 1979), 410.

26 John Wyndham, *Web* (New York: Penguin, 1980), 68.

27 Tuan, “Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective,” 403.

28 Tuan, “Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective,” 403.

29 John R. Gillis, “Island Sojourns,” *Geographical Review* 97, no. 2 (2007): 274.

30 Murray, *Island Paradise*, XVIII.

ease from social problems at home and that is one of the reasons for people visiting them. Being isolated from the rest of the world on a remote island is what makes such places special. Unfortunately for the characters, the feeling of being in a paradise is just temporary. The paradise slowly transforms itself into a prison. These changes occur not only within the character but also with the place itself.

The geographical aspects of an island help one to imagine an island as a prison. A repeatedly adopted feature of an island is a mountain or a volcano. These island aspects resemble a watchtower in a prison compound. High cliffs and reefs help to build this image too because the character notices that he or she has limited ways to escape. The characters usually notice that they have been lured to an island under a false image as demonstrated by Claudia Bell and John Lyall on page 5 of the article. Moreover, the constant fear of being watched isolates the character within himself. The fear of being watched is depicted in for example, *The Magus*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Web* and *Robinson Crusoe*. The sublime island changes into a trap. Fowles named the island in *The Magus* Phraxos because the word *Phraxos* means “fenced”³¹ in Greek. The aspects of an island are essential for the spatial awareness. An island usually consists of a mountain, which rises up in the sky and can be seen from far distances.

The topos of a mountain is closely related to the topos of a tower. Daniela Hodrová associated them together due to their vertical character.³² She also claims that towers were often used as a real prison.³³ In fairytales or chivalric romances a princess is usually imprisoned in a tower.³⁴ When imagining an island, it can resemble a prison tower that rises from the sea. The massive piece of rock represented by a volcano or a mountain amazes people with its hugeness and immediately makes a powerful impact on a person at first sight. Such impact is demonstrated in *The Magus* as well as in *Web*. The main character Nicholas Urfe from *The Magus* sees Phraxos, his future prison as follows, “Phraxos was beautiful. There was no other adjective; it was not just pretty picturesque, charming- it was simply and effortlessly beautiful. It took my breath away when I first saw it.”³⁵ The main character Arnold Delarge from *Web* is also literary enchanted by the island. He describes the typical geographical aspects of an island that make a powerful impact on people,

[p]hotographs had prepared me for the shape of it but not the colour. That was dazzling. [...] A line of white beach, a vivid band of green above it, and beyond, the expected shape of the twin hills, but now green for two thirds of their height, and blue-brown for the rest. My first feeling was of disbelief that such a gem of an island could have been left deserted. My second, a twinge of misgiving: it looked too good to be true.³⁶

Islands have a powerful impact on Arnold as well as on Nicholas from *The Magus*. These images are later distorted when both characters find out that they are in an actual prison.

31 Roula Ikonomakis, *Post-war British Fiction as ‘Metaphysical Arhography’: ‘Gods, Godgames and Goodness’ in John Fowles’s The Magus and Iris Murdoch’s The Sea, the Sea* (Oxford: Peter Land, 2008), 59.

32 Daniela Hodrová, Zdeněk Hrbata, Marie Kubínová, and Vladimír Macura, *Poetika mist* (Praha: H&H, 1997), 201.

33 Hodrová et al., *Poetika mist*, 202.

34 Hodrová et al., *Poetika mist*, 202.

35 John Fowles, *The Magus* (New York: Brown and Company, 1965), 37.

36 Wyndham, *Web*, 59.

In island-like literature the island transforms itself from paradise into prison as well as the character changing with it. Hodrová supports the idea that a prison is a place of change.³⁷ People that are locked in prison are considered to change. Daniel Defoe gives the reader this option of an insight into a prison. The main character in *Robinson Crusoe* uses the island for religious contemplation after being stranded. Robinson is imprisoned on his island and sees it as a prison. He calls it accordingly as, “Island of Despair”³⁸ and refers to it as a “horrid island.”³⁹ Robinson even writes about his island as of a prison in his journal, “for tho’ I was indeed at large in the place, yet the island was certainly a prison to me, and that in the worst sense in the world.”⁴⁰ Defoe made his character feel as if Robinson were in a prison and put him on an island, which the author described as a place with paradisiacal means.

The transformation from one topos to another will still be present in island-like literature. People will continue to associate different motives with islands when reading books about shipwrecked sailors, adventurers and colonists. They will continue to idealize them and see islands as perfect places, as paradises. Daniel Brinton, the author of *Current Notes on Anthropology* says, “[w]e have not yet done with seeking on the earthly plane the pristine Paradise, Eden, ‘the land of joy.’”⁴¹ The vision of earthly Eden fascinated people throughout the history. Yi-Fu Tuan supports these claims by saying that “[p]eople dream of ideal places.”⁴² These idealized islands usually turn out to be the right opposite due to the distorted images about them, which only help to form the transition from paradise to prison. Despite living in different centuries, the perception of an island as a prison is apparent in English literature such as in, *Utopia*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, *The Tempest*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Magus* and *Lord of the Flies*. Islands are special places and the vision of a perfect island will continue to occupy human minds in their imagination. All perfect islands may be considered just as the one in *Utopia*. The word *utopia* is “a place which is a non-place, simultaneously constituted by a movement of affirmation and denial.”⁴³ All perfect islands behave just like the aforementioned non-existent place and just like the island Utopia, “the phantom island is sustained only in the imagination: nowhere, if it is anywhere, is in the mind.”⁴⁴

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37 Hodrová et al., *Poetika míst*, 108.

38 Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 58.

39 Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 52.

40 Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 81.

41 Daniel G. Brinton, “Current Notes on Anthropology (VII).” *Science, New Series* 1, no. 18 (1895): 488.

42 Tuan, *Topophilia*, 114.

43 Fátima Vieira, “The Concept of Utopia,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 4.

44 Steven Hutchinson, “Mapping Utopias,” *Modern Philology* 85, no. 2 (1987): 172.

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