

My Notes

Setting a Purpose for Reading

- While you read, use two different colored pens to underline details that describe the similarities and differences between utopian and dystopian societies.
- Circle unknown words and phrases. Try to determine the meanings of the words by using context clues, word parts, or a dictionary.

About the Author

Benjamin Obler is a modern-day instructor and novelist. Originally from Minneapolis, Minnesota, Obler teaches writing at Gotham Writer's Workshop in New York City. He received an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Glasgow, Scotland. He's been on BBC Radio and was interviewed at Strand bookstore for a documentary film about coffee. His first novel, *Javascotia*, was published in 2009.



Essay

In a Dreadfully Perfect World

by Benjamin Obler

WORD CONNECTIONS

Roots and Affixes

The word **utopia** comes from the Greek *ou*, meaning “no” or “not,” and *topos*, meaning “place.” But its meaning is closer to *eutopia*, made from the English prefix *eu*, meaning “good,” and *topos*. Which of the two words, *eutopia* or *utopia*, would better describe a place with a pink sky? A world with no war or poverty? A dystopia is a community or society, usually fictional, that is in some important way undesirable or frightening. The word **dystopia** comes from the Latin prefix *dys-*, meaning “bad” or “abnormal,” and the Greek word *topos*.

1 When Katniss Everdeen draws back her bow to unleash the arrow that will help free her outcast friends in *The Hunger Games* (2013), few moviegoers were likely thinking of Thomas More's¹ novel of 500 years earlier. Nevertheless, if it weren't for More's *Utopia* (1516), perhaps a whole genre of novels would not exist today. Utopian novels, portraying imagined, idealized societies began with More, and out of them grew dystopian novels in which, typically, societies grow more corrupt, diabolical, and inhumane. Though the two genres are vastly different, and in some ways completely opposite, utopian and dystopian fiction are interrelated and rely upon each other.

2 More's novel is set on an island called Utopia, where everyone is employed and work days are only six hours long. People are not burdened by property ownership or the drive to earn money. In fact, they are free to take from the supply stores whatever food they need. Because the laws are so simple,

¹ Thomas More, or “Sir Thomas More,” as he is sometimes called, was knighted by King Henry in the 1520s. More is also referred to as Saint Thomas More because of his involvement in the Catholic Church.

there's no need for lawyers. All Utopians agree that war is barbaric, so wars never happen. Just about every aspect of life is perfect, and all woes and pains have vanished.

3 More's work is the earliest of its kind, and since then all stories that **depict** any **idealized** outcome have been described as *utopian*. Utopian texts are essentially hopeful, imagining positive outcomes and the disappearance of those traits of real life that bring suffering—inequality, poverty, injustice, bigotry. In utopian stories, peacefulness and reason prevail over chaos and greed. Conversely, dystopian texts depict the worst possible outcomes of societal strife, often involving the aftermath of social change that went wrong and led to **oppression** or chaos.

4 Utopian works were popular for a long time before dystopian novels became more common. Writers across three centuries turned to the imagined place to project their hopes. In More's time, the novel was a relatively new way to talk about ideas of civic life and analyze customs and rules. With the utopian novel, writers could awaken the public imagination to what harmony might be possible.

5 In 1619, Johann Valentin Andreae published *Christianopolis*, which tells of a distant island city where the citizens use no money and own no property. Economic equality rules, and all material goods needed for life are provided by the state. Tommaso Campanella produced a similar novel, *City of the Sun*, in 1623, featuring a peaceful place where property is communal and money is not needed. Campanella improved on More's six-hour workday, making the workday on his island of Taprobane only four hours long. Abolishment of slavery, good education for all, and rule by bright, capable people—life on the island was utopian in every way.

6 Remote settings such as islands are a popular feature of the utopian genre. Francis Bacon's *The New Atlantis* (1624) features an island, as did utopian works by several other writers. Other utopian worlds were found near the north pole, or through underground caves. It seemed that for writers to envision a harmonious society, it had to be completely unconnected from any system in place in any western nation at the time.

7 In contrast, dystopian works typically depict settings that are distantly removed from us not by geography, but by time. The typical dystopian society springs up from the foundations of our own society sometime in the future. For example, Lois Lowry's *The Giver* is set in a futuristic time, when many problems have been solved. Likewise, in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, the setting is an unnamed American city of the future. Dystopias are projections of today's society in more advanced stages. For example, imbalances of power grow more imbalanced, limited rights become greatly restricted, and partial oppression becomes totalitarian rule. Writers of dystopian works want these connections to the current time and place to be clearly understood. The purpose of many



Plan of the island of Utopia. Illustration from Thomas More's novel, depicting an idealized society living on an imaginary island.

depict: represent

idealized: better than something actually is

oppression: unjust rule or treatment

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dystopian stories is to illustrate the potential for terror and catastrophe that lurks in our existing systems. To set a dystopian novel in some imaginary island would defeat the purpose of delivering such chilling possibilities to readers.

8 In the 18th century, utopian novels began to **proliferate**, and the societies depicted in them grew more extreme. By 1755, Étienne-Gabriel Morelly, in his novel *Code de la Nature* (Nature's Code), advocates for the abolition of property, trade, politics, marriage, privilege, and law. Everything that stands in the way of individual liberty is **eradicated**.

9 Subsets of the utopian genre emerged, such as the feminist utopia. The first was *The Blazing World* (1666) by Margaret Cavendish. In it, a shipwrecked young woman reaches a foreign land via the North Pole. She is crowned empress and uses her power to keep the kingdom free from war, religious division, and unfair sexual discrimination. Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbette's *New Amazonia* is another example. Her setting is Ireland in the year 2472. Because they are corrupt, men are barred from political office. Everyone is vegetarian.

10 The appeal of the perfect world had a powerful hold on some writers. Theodor Hertzka, a political economist, wrote *Freiland* (*Freeland*) (1890) about an imaginary utopian colony in Africa. Then he tried (unsuccessfully) to create a real village, Freeland, in Africa.

11 A key difference between utopias and dystopias is their relationship to the real world. Hertzka tried to establish a real-world replica of his fictional colony. But no writer would ever try to create a real-world replica of their fictional dystopia. Utopias are written in earnest, as admirable models, whereas dystopias are devised to serve as warnings of what we should never let our world become.

12 The utopian craze peaked with Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*. First published in 1888, it was the third largest best-seller of its time. In the novel, the protagonist Julien West wakes in the year 2000. The United States is now a socialist utopia. People work shorter hours and retire at age 45. Production and distribution of goods is smooth and efficient thanks to a regimented labor force. Selling 400,000 copies by 1897, Bellamy's novel set the market ablaze for such utopian works. Between 1860 and 1887, no fewer than 11 such works of fiction were published in the United States by various authors.

13 By comparison, a list of popular dystopian novels published between 2000 and 2015 contains at least 75 titles.

14 Utopias and dystopias are siblings, and one of their similarities is foresight. In casting their imaginations forward, many writers of both utopian and dystopian novels have described technologies that were impossible for the time. For example, Bellamy's character is taken to a store that cuts out middlemen, much like a modern-day Costco or Sam's Club. The concept of credit cards is introduced, and Bellamy also predicts both sermons and music being available in the home through cable "telephone," much like the internet during its early, wired days.

WORD CONNECTIONS

Roots and Affixes

When it comes to opposition, the words **beneficent** and **malevolent** describe a person or an action's intent. Generally, words with the prefix *bene-* (good, well) have positive connotations, and words that begin with *male-* (bad, wrong) have negative connotations.

proliferate: multiply quickly
eradicated: wiped out completely

15 But utopias are in the eyes of the beholder—a matter of interpretation. For example, in Bellamy's book, one judge presides over all court cases, appointing two colleagues to represent the prosecution and defense. This is meant to seem simple and elegant—incorruptible. But from another point of view a single judge enforcing all law amounts to dictatorship, and the appointment of colleagues smells of corruption, creating ample opportunity for self-serving deals. To some total equality is the ideal, but to others the measures taken to achieve that equality would be repression. Utopias such as the one depicted in Corbette's *New Amazonia* would not be a utopia to everyone.

16 This highlights a similarity between utopias and dystopias. In any real society or form of government, there are **beneficent** people and **malevolent** people. Some people respect order, obey the law, are kind and peaceful. Others break laws, serve themselves, lie, and manipulate the system to their advantage. What utopian and dystopian works have in common is that they both unbalance reality, making everything starkly black and white, taking away one aspect and leaving the other. In this way, utopian and dystopian novels are very much alike. They both exaggerate things for dramatic effect, capture our imaginations, and make us feel the stark power of what might be.

Making Observations

- What details in the essay stand out to you?
- What similarities between utopias and dystopias surprise you?



A typical element in dystopian works is oppression. In *The Hunger Games*, characters deal with oppression and totalitarianism from a powerful government system. In turn, citizens, such as Katniss Everdeen (played by actress Jennifer Lawrence), must fight to survive.

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beneficent: good-intentioned
malevolent: evil-intentioned