

Utopia vs. Dystopia

Introduction

We have all seen movies or read books about the end of the world as we know it. In each instance, a different method for world domination is portrayed. In some cases, ray gun-toting aliens with big heads invade the planet and put their enormous insect-like queen on a throne in the White House. In others, the citizens of the world are slowly brainwashed by prime time television into becoming dull-witted slaves to evil multinational conglomerates. These books and movies have one thing in common: they are all dystopias.

Simply, a **dystopia** is defined as a bad place, a place where no one would want to live, a place in which one's rights and freedoms would be gone, a place where the environment would be devastated. Dystopia is created from the Greek prefix “dys” meaning *bad, harsh, or wrong* and the Greek root “topos” meaning *place*.

In fiction, like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, or in movies like *The Matrix*, the bad place is more than a setting. The dystopia acts as a vehicle for an author's dramatic opinion about the way we live today. In this way, dystopian literature is usually crafted so that it acts as a warning to us - to stop what we're doing or face the consequences.

You may wonder how dystopian literature is different from fairy tales or horror stories. The difference is this: a dystopia is more than a story about a person who acts badly in an otherwise sane world. In a dystopia, everything (from minor characters to setting and beyond) focuses on one evil premise. The protagonist is an outcast of this world and usually the only one able to see the problems inherent in it.

The opposite of a dystopia is a **utopia**. “Utopia” was coined by Thomas Moore for his 1516 book *Utopia*, describing a fictional island in the Atlantic Ocean. It is a play on the Greek prefixes “ou” meaning *no or not* and “eu” meaning *good*. So a utopia is literally “*good place*” and “*no place*” which implies that a utopia is perfect but does not and will not exist. A place, state, or condition that is ideally perfect in respect of politics, laws, customs, and conditions. Utopias can also be defined as an ideal [community](#) or [society](#) possessing a perfect [socio-politico-legal system](#). The term has been used to describe both [intentional communities](#) that attempt to create an ideal society, and fictional societies portrayed in [literature](#).

Characteristics of a Utopian Society:

- Peaceful, benevolent government
- Equality for citizens
- Access to education, healthcare, employment, and so forth
- Citizens are free to think independently
- A safe, favorable environment

Types of Utopian Guiding Principles/ Goals

- **Religious Beliefs:** Set religious beliefs guide peoples' actions and organization. Examples include Amish, Shaker communities
- **Humanism:** Beliefs that stress the value and goodness of human beings and strive to respect everyone and view all as equals. Examples include communes, communism
- **Science and Technology:** Science and Technology are embraced and enhance our lives, life is easier, more convenient, we are healthier/ live longer. Examples include *Star Trek*, *Walden Two* by B.F. Skinner
- **Economics:** Money is abolished, citizens only do the work they enjoy. Examples include *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K. Le Guin
- **Ecology:** Back to nature – humans live in harmony with nature and reject industrialization. Examples include *Ecotopia* by Ernest Callenbach, *Pacific Edge* by Kim Stanley Robinson

- **Politics:** Governing body is equitable, fair, and beneficial to its citizens. Examples include *The Republic* by Plato, *Utopia* by Thomas More, *A Modern Utopia* by H.G. Wells

Unlike a dystopia, a utopia can be difficult to describe. Writers of utopian literature are often caught in a pickle: the perfect place for one is never the perfect place for all. Because of this, the term "**utopian**" can be used outside the literary world to negatively describe a concept or belief as somewhat naive and idealistic. If a utopia is truly perfect for all, there would be no conflict (which would make a pretty boring story). A dystopia, on the other hand, generally has wide-spread appeal to audiences because it plays upon our deepest fears - a loss of life, liberty, and happiness.

Characteristics of a Dystopian Society

- Propaganda replaces education and is used to control the citizens of society.
- Information, independent thought, and freedom are restricted.
- Citizens are perceived to be under constant surveillance.
- Citizens have a fear of the outside world.
- Citizens live in a dehumanized state.
- The natural world is banished and distrusted.
- Citizens conform to uniform expectations. Individuality and dissent are bad.

Types of Dystopian Controls

Most dystopian works present a world in which oppressive societal control and the illusion of a perfect society are maintained through one or more of the following types of controls:

- **Corporate control:** One or more large corporations control society through products, advertising, and/or the media. Examples include *Minority Report*, *Running Man*, *Continuum*.
- **Bureaucratic control:** Society is controlled by a mindless bureaucracy through a tangle of red tape, relentless regulations, and power-hungry government officials. Examples: *The Hunger Games*, *1984*, *Brazil*, *Robocop*, *Elysium*
- **Technological control:** Society is controlled by technology—through computers, robots, and/or scientific means. Examples include *The Matrix*, *The Terminator*, and *I, Robot*.
- **Philosophical/religious control:** Society is controlled by philosophical or religious ideology often enforced through a dictatorship or theocratic government. Examples include *Matched*, *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Traits of Dystopian fiction

Many films and works of literature featuring dystopian societies exhibit at least a few of the following traits:

- The society is an illusion of a perfect utopian world.
- A selectively told back story of a war, revolution, uprising, spike in overpopulation, natural disaster or some other climatic event which resulted in dramatic changes to society
- A standard of living among the lower and middle class that is generally poorer than in the contemporary society. This is not always the case, however, in *Brave New World* and *Equilibrium*, people enjoy a much higher standard of living in exchange for the loss of intelligence and emotion respectively.
- A protagonist who questions the society. The dystopian protagonist often feels trapped and is struggling to escape; questions the existing social and political systems; believes or feels that

something is terribly wrong with the society in which he or she lives; helps the audience recognize the negative aspects of the dystopian world through his or her perspective.

- Necessarily, if it is based on our world, a shift of emphasis of control to corporations, autocratic cliques or bureaucracies.
- Because dystopian literature takes place in the future, it often features technology more advanced than that of the contemporary society. Usually, the advanced technology comparable to or more primitive than what we have today.
- For the reader to engage with it, dystopian fiction typically has one other trait: familiarity. It is not enough to show people living in a society that seems pleasant. The society must have echoes of today, of the reader's own experience. If the reader can identify the patterns or trends that would lead to the dystopia, it becomes a more involving and effective experience. Authors can use a dystopia effectively to highlight their own concerns about societal trends.