

Utopias and Dystopias: Definitions and Characteristics from ReadWriteThink.org

Utopia: A place, state, or condition that is ideally perfect in respect of politics, laws, customs, and conditions. This does not mean that the people are perfect, but the system is perfect.

Characteristics of a Utopian Society

- Information, independent thought, and freedom are promoted.
- A figurehead or concept brings the citizens of the society together, but not treated as singular.
- Citizens are truly free to think independently.
- Citizens have no fear of the outside world.
- Citizens live in a harmonious state.
- The natural world is embraced and revered.
- Citizens embrace social and moral ideals. Individuality and innovation are welcomed.
- The society evolves with change to make a perfect utopian world.

Types of Utopian Ideas

Most utopian works present a world in which societal ideals and the common good of society are maintained through one or more of the following types of beliefs:

- Economic ideas: Money is abolished. Citizens only do work that they enjoy.
- Governing ideas: Society is controlled by citizenry in a largely individualist, communal, social and sometimes libertarian “government”. The term government is used loosely, as power is seen to corrupt, so constructed government systems are warned against.
- Technological ideas: In some cases, technology may be embraced to enhance the human living experience and make human life easier and more convenient. Other ideas propose that technology drives a wedge between humanity and nature, therefore becoming an evil to society.
- Ecological ideas: Back to the nature, humans live harmoniously with nature and reverse the effects of industrialization.
- Philosophical/religious ideas: Society believes in a common religious philosophy, some fashion their surroundings around the biblical Garden of Eden. In inter-religious utopias, all ideas of God are welcomed. In intra-religious utopias, a singular idea of God is accepted and practiced by all citizens.

The Utopian Hero

- can be an insider who works to promote the ideals of society.
- questions the existing social and political systems with the aim to bring positive change.
- believes or feels that the society in which he or she lives is always getting better.
- helps the audience recognize the positive aspects of the utopian world through his or her perspective.
- can also be an outsider who must learn about this new society (the POV character for the audience)

Dystopia / Anti-utopia: A dystopia is an imagined universe in which oppressive societal control or an apocalypse has created a world in which the conditions of life are miserable, characterized by human misery, poverty, oppression, violence, disease, and/or pollution. Anti-utopias *appear* to be utopian or were intended to be so, but a fatal flaw or other factor has destroyed or twisted the intended utopian world or concept, such as in *The Giver*. Dystopias and anti-utopias are maintained through corporate, bureaucratic, technological, moral, or totalitarian control. Through an exaggerated worst-case scenario, authors make a criticism about a current trend, societal norm, or political system through their dystopias / anti-utopias.

Characteristics of a Dystopian Society

- Propaganda is used to control the citizens of society.
- Information, independent thought, and freedom are restricted.
- A figurehead or concept is worshipped by the citizens of the society.
- 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.
- The society is an illusion of a perfect utopian world.

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* and *Running Man*.
- Bureaucratic control: Society is controlled by a mindless bureaucracy through a tangle of red tape, relentless regulations, and incompetent government officials. Examples in film include *Brazil*.
- 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, such as in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The Dystopian Hero

- 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.