Utopia

“The Place that Does Not Exist”
Meanings

- Comes from Greek meaning no place
- Also means good place
  - The double meaning is probably intended
  - It’s a good place that doesn’t exist
Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia*

- Coined the word in his 1516 novel meaning a society that has a perfect social, legal and political system
- Executed for treason 1535 for refusing to accept Henry VIII as head of Church of England
- Canonized in 1935
Different Types of Utopia

• Economic
  – Includes an equal distribution of goods
  – Often abolishes money

• Political and Historical
  – Often have harsh gov’ts with little individual freedom
  – Historical utopia is seen as world peace
• Religious
  – Most commonly found in human history
  – Members required to adhere to particular religions traditions that established the utopia
  – One of the most famous communities is the Shaker communities in the U.S.

• Scientific and Technological
  – Often part of science fiction and set in the future
  – Include absence of death, disease and suffering, changes in what it means to be human
Dystopia

- Antithesis of Utopia (also known as anti-utopia)
- A dystopic society is characterized by negative traits the author chooses to illustrate, such as poverty, dictatorship, violence, and/or pollution.
Dystopia vs. Anti-utopia

- Some academic circles distinguish between anti-utopia and dystopia.
- A dystopia does not pretend to be good (1984).
- An anti-utopia appears to be utopian or was intended to be so, but a fatal flaw or other factor has destroyed or twisted the intended utopian world or concept (Uglies).
Commonalities of Dystopias

• They are negative and undesirable societies.

• Dystopias are seen as visions of "dangerous and alienating future societies," often criticizing current trends in culture.

• It is a culture where the condition of life is "extremely bad," as from deprivation, oppression, or terror.

• It can be a utopia with one fatal flaw.
Usually some sort of social restrictions are placed on members of the society.

- The aim of this is to produce a society of equality.
- Genetic alteration may occur to produce as uniform a people as possible.
- Human sexuality is often restricted.
- There is often a lack of social groups and families to prevent private social bonds.
- Independent religions are absent or the state may be a religion established to control the masses.
- Dystopias are usually set in urban locations and nature is looked upon as dangerous and anti-social.
• Politically, dystopias are often dictatorships, totalitarian, or fascist.
  – Gov’t often rules with an iron fist.

• Economically, dystopias go one of two ways:
  – Gov’t has complete control over the economy (no privatization).
  – Private corporations have more control over the populace than the gov’t, often in the form of megacorporations.
Characteristics of Dystopian Fiction

• Back story
  – War, revolution, uprising, critical overpopulation or other disaster causes the dystopia to rise.
  – This results in a shift in emphasis of control, from the good old days to corporations, totalitarian dictatorships or bureaucracies.
  – To emphasize disintegration of society, the standard of living for the lower and middle classes is considerably lower than contemporary society.
The Hero

- The story usually centers on a protagonist who questions the society, often feeling intuitively that something is terribly wrong.
- The hero comes to believe that escape or even overturning the social order is possible and decides to act at the risk of life and limb; in some utopias, this may appear as irrational even to him, but he still acts.
• The Conflict
  – In many cases, the hero's conflict brings him to a representative of the dystopia who articulates its principles.
  – There is usually a group of people somewhere in the society who are not under the complete control of the state, and in whom the hero of the novel usually puts his or her hope, although he or she still fails to change anything.
• Climax and Dénouement
  – The hero's goal is either escape or destruction of the social order.
  – However, the story is often (but not always) unresolved.
  – That is, the narrative may deal with individuals in a dystopian society who are unsatisfied, and may rebel, but ultimately fail to change anything.
  – Sometimes they themselves end up changed to conform to the society's norms.
• Resonance
  – 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 unpleasant.
  – 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.