**Utopian/Anti-Utopian/Dystopian Literature**

**Overview:** One of the oldest and most respected forms of literature we have deals in hopes and fears of societies—using fiction to depict worlds where everyone lives in peace, harmony, prosperity, and happiness (utopia), or the opposite (dystopia). Sometimes these are stories of an idea afterlife or an eternity of torment; sometimes they are “lost” or hidden societies under the waves or in a secret valley in an inaccessible mountain range, but more often they are societies much like the ones the writers live in, or wish they lived in, or fear they might be heading for.

**Definitions**

**Utopia**: The good place (eutopia) that’s no place—it’s a pun in Greek. In literature, a utopia is a depiction of a society that fulfills someone’s definition of a great place to live. These are always controversial, hence always rhetorical. That is, an author makes an argument for this kind of society by presenting it in the best possible light. Example: Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward,*  H.G. Wells’ *Men Like Gods.*

**Anti-Utopia**: Sometimes what looks like a utopian story is actually an *anti*-utopia, best thought of as a satirical send-up of “other people’s utopia.” That is, it is a depiction of a place that satirizes a type of “ideal” society that the author actually abhors. For example, a super-feminist society meant to criticize feminism, or a pacifist utopia meant to depict peaceniks as cowardly wimps. For example: Vonnegut’s *Harrison Bergeron,* Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Coming Race,* Orwell’s *Animal Farm.*

**Dystopia:** A world so bad that nobody could imagine it as a good place, except maybe the villains in the story. This is by far the dominant form of the three types in 20th and 21st century literature. Examples: *1984, The Road, Water World, The Postman.*

**Hybrid works:** Often a single work of literature in this genre might have a pair of societies: one a utopia, the other a dystopia, or a collection of different worlds that vary from utopian to dystopian (as with many intergalactic tales with a different civilization on different planets): e.g. *The City Not Long After, Star Trek, Avatar, Firefly/Serenity.* Some stories depict apparently perfect (or at least highly advanced) societies with a flaw or technological breakthrough that suggest a dystopia in the offing: e.g. *Brave New World*, *Caprica, The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.*

**Types of Utopia/Dystopia**:

* **Political**--a shining city on a hill or a brutal dictatorship (or a polite, insidious one)
* **Ecological**—garden of earthly delights or toxic wasteland
* **Spiritual/Religious—**harmonious community of the blessed or city of the damned (or a Sodom & Gomorah of vice)
* **Technological**—nature’s ills have been vanquished and robots make our coffee, or robots have taken over, whether benignly (*Wall-E)* or violently (*RUR, I-Robot* the film)