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Utopias and Dystopias:

Definition and Characteristics from ReadWriteThink.org

Directions: As we read about Utopian and Dystopian societies, write 10 annotations in the margins. Annotations can include your thoughts about what the text is saying, a connection that you make between something else as you read, explaining why a part is important, etc.

**Utopia**: A place, state, or condition that is ideally perfect in respect of politics, laws, customs, and conditions.

**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:

• Ecomonic 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 Protagonist**

• 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.

**Dystopia**: A futuristic, imagined universe in which oppressive societal control and the illusion of a perfect society are maintained through corporate, bureaucratic, technological, moral, or totalitarian control. Dystopias, through an exaggerated worst-case scenario, make a criticism about a current trend, societal norm, or political system.

**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.

**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 recognizes the negative aspects of the dystopian world through his or her perspective