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, and 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, and communism
❖ **Science and Technology**: Science and technology are embraced and enhance our lives, life is easier, more convenient, we are healthier and live longer. Examples include *Star Trek and 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 and *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 and *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