

American Utopian Expressions Spring 1999

English 4336-001

Office Hrs.: T/TH: 9:30-10:30; 3:30-4; M, W by apt.

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T/TH: 2 - 3:20 Please schedule appts.; when calling, leave name & phone number

Nature/Goals of the Course

The primary goal of the course is to offer a chronological introduction to various forms of expressing American utopian ideals. (For a definition of a literary utopia, see below. The emphasis in this course is on eutopian [the good place], rather than dystopian [the bad place] literature, though in many of the texts selected there are strong dystopian elements.) Since this is an "American literature" course, most of the texts we study can be classified as "utopian," "American," and "literary." The works selected suggest the great diversity of American utopian literature, a diversity I have emphasized by consciously including works by well-known authors (e.g., Hawthorne, Twain), authors who write in popular genres (e.g. utopian science fiction), and authors of different genders, races, classes, and regions. Nonetheless, to understand more fully the contexts and meanings of the fictions, indeed to begin to grasp the crucial importance of utopianism in America, we must move beyond conventional notions of "literary" utopias to examine expressions of utopianism found in sacred texts, travel accounts, autobiographies, manifestos and declarations, intentional communities, world's fairs, entertainment parks, and the Internet. Including these types of utopian expressions helps to raise essential questions about American utopianism. How does the "form" of a utopia effect the conception and communication of its "message"? Why do certain forms of utopian expression become popular during specific historical eras? To what degree do gender, race, class, and geography shape utopian projections and responses to those projections? These will be the types of questions that will direct class discussions, exam essay questions, the paper, and the Internet report.

A secondary goal is self-analysis, especially in the reader-response paper. The paper will give students the opportunity to examine the value and importance of what they bring to the experience of reading utopias, to examine the aspects of their values, attitudes, and memories that enable them to interpret the texts before them -- to co-create the utopias.

Working Definitions

There are some important distinguishing characteristics that can help us to differentiate between utopian literature, utopian communities, and utopian thought. I am using the three general categories outlined by Lyman Tower Sargent in "The Problem of Definition," Extrapolation 16 (1975): 137-48 and "The Three Faces of Utopias Revisited," Utopian Studies 5.1 (1994): 1-37, though my definitions differ from his. (See "Defining America as Utopia" in Roemer, ed., America as Utopia [New York: Burt Franklin, 1981]: 1-9.)

Utopian literature: A literary utopia is a fairly detailed, narrative description of an imaginary community, society, or world that invites readers to experience vicariously a culture that represents radical, though identifiable, alternatives (both iconoclastic and normative) to the readers' culture.

If the imaginary world is much better than the reader's world, then the text is usually called "utopian" or "eutopian" (e.g., More's Utopia, Bellamy's Looking Backward). "Dystopia" is commonly used as a term describing the depiction of much worse worlds (e.g., Huxley's Brave New World, Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-four.) Obviously, there are many works that combine both eutopian and dystopian elements (e.g., Twain's Connecticut Yankee). Furthermore, even the cheeriest of eutopias often contains dystopian warnings, and the bleakest of dystopias sometimes implies eutopian possibilities. Designating a eutopia or dystopia is, thus, clearly a matter of relative emphasis rather than absolute classification.

The authors of both eutopias and dystopias often hope to alter their reader's perceptions of and feelings about the origins, realities, and potentialities of the present. In many, though certainly not all, cases, authors hope that the altered perceptions and feelings will move readers to actions that will make the real world more closely resemble their imaginary better worlds. From the reader's viewpoint, engagement with a utopian text offers opportunities for self-evaluation (values, ideals, etc.), as well as evaluation of the origins, realities, and potentialities of his or her present culture. Depending on a complex matrix of personal, reading, and cultural contexts, the reading of a utopia can reinforce, undermine, and/or liberate readers' perceptions of themselves and their worlds, and even motivate them to change their private perceptions and personal lives or to act out their interpretations of the utopia in a social arena.

One final note: Modern readers, especially those conditioned by formalist literary criteria often applied to short stories and novels (e.g., irony, ambiguity, subtle characterization, emotional restraint, verbal density, rich and realistic descriptions, and a tendency to avoid authorial intrusions and didactic preaching and propagandizing), frequently encounter difficulties if they expect a literary utopia to be a "good novel." Better models for understanding the assumptions and expectations of many of the pre-20th-century authors and readers of literary utopias are fictional works such as Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Biblical parables, Platonic dialogues, sermons, travel narratives, science fiction, and psychological and philosophical thought experiments (e.g., What if? and What ought to be?). Utopian literature is very much of a hybrid form of discourse that borrows from many different oral and written fictional and non-fictional traditions.

Utopian communities (often called intentional communities) form when groups act out their utopian ideals by creating a living environment that, from their viewpoint, represents or points toward a much better way of life than is practiced outside the community. These communities may boast hundreds of members or be as small as urban co-op living experiments. Some are dominated by charismatic and/or wealthy individuals; several of the most long-lived have been religious. There are, however, many examples of communities that lack these qualities. Good sources of information on American intentional communities are: R. Fogarty's Dictionary of American and Communal Utopian History, Donald E. Pitzer's America's Communal Utopias, and the most recent edition of Communities Directory: A Guide to Cooperative Living. Overlaps between literary utopias and communes occur when the former inspires the latter (e.g., the several communities inspired by Skinner's Walden Two) or the latter inspires the former (e.g., Brook Farm was the touchstone for Hawthorne's Blithedale). There are also intersections between intentional communities and world's fairs and theme parks.

Utopian thought can be expressed in sacred texts, in manifestos, treatises, histories, songs, and even in Internet discussion lists and web-sites. Its authors' aims and the effects upon the readers or listeners are often similar to the aims and effects of literary utopias, though the lack of narrative, characters, and detailed descriptions of many aspects of the imaginary better culture tend to make the experience of reading a utopian treatise or declaration less of a particular vicarious (lived) experience and more of a general intellectual or emotional experience. Though, depending on each reader's background and attitudes, this "rule" will have many exceptions. Overlaps occur in many ways: Sacred texts, such as the Bible, and declarations, such as the Declaration of Independence, have been used as sources of images, values, rhetoric, and authority by many American authors of literary utopias and founders of intentional communities, and readers often use their knowledge of these texts and declarations to give meaning to the utopian narratives. Furthermore, some texts, such as Plato's Republic, Brown's Alcuin, and Bellamy's Equality, have so little narrative and character development, that the line between literary utopia and utopian treatise becomes very slim.

Readings

Books: Hawthorne, Blithedale Romance; Bellamy, Looking Backward; Twain, Connecticut Yankee; Gilman, Herland; Skinner, Walden Two; Le Guin, The Dispossessed; Piercy, Woman on the Edge of Time. There will also be a course packet of short readings (SR).

Although no "research" paper is required, students may wish to examine secondary sources that concentrate on American utopian literature -- broad coverage: K. Roemer, ed. America as Utopia; V. Parrington, American Dreams; J. Simmons, "Utopian Cycles" Extrapolation 39 (Fall 1998): 189-98; period or issue studies: K. Roemer, Obsolete Necessity; C. Rooney, Dreams and Visions; H. Segal, Technological Utopianism; J. Pfaelzer, Utopian Novels, F. Shor, Utopianism and Radicalism in a Reforming America; utopias by women: C. Kessler, ed., Daring to Dream; contemporary utopias: T. Moylan, Demand the Impossible. The most comprehensive bibliography is L. T. Sargent's British and American Utopian Lit., 1516-1985. Since 1975, Utopus Discovered, the newsletter of the Society for Utopian Studies, has included information about research and teaching. Since 1990 Utopian Studies has been the major journal in the field. (For information about the newsletter and journal, contact Lyman Tower Sargent, Society for Utopian Studies, Political Science, U of Missouri-St. Louis, St. Louis, MO 63121-4499.) The web-site for the Society for Utopian Studies is <<http://www.utoronto.ca/utopia/>> . I will distribute other useful web-sites.

Tentative Schedule, Topics, Readings

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| Jan 19 | Introduction to the Course |
| Jan 19 | Foundations: Utopias in Sacred Texts <u>Readings:</u> Genesis, Exodus, Revelations (all SR) |
| Jan 21 | Foundations: Visionary Utopias |

Readings: Black Elk's Great Vision (SR)

- Jan 26 Foundations: European Exploration and Travel Accounts
Readings: 3rd Voyage Letter from Columbus, John Smith, Description of New England (all SR)
- Jan 26 Puritan (Sermon) Visions & (Historical) Re-visions
Readings: Winthrop, Model of Christian Charity, Mather, Magnalia Christi Americana (all SR)
- Jan 28, Revolutionary Declarations, Petitions, and Letters
 Feb 2 Readings: Jefferson, Declaration of Independence, Black Petitions for Freedom, Crevecoeur, Letters from an American Farmer (all SR)
- Feb 4 First Examination
- Feb 9, Early to Mid-19th-Century Autobiographical Fictions: 11, 16
 Paulding and Griffith through Melville and Hawthorne
Readings: Douglass, Narrative, (SR), Thoreau, Walden, (SR), Hawthorne, Blithedale
- Late 19th- Early 20th- Century Utopias in Song, Community, Fiction, and Architectural / Technological Entertainment
Readings: Ghost Dance Songs and Intentional Communities (slides, lecture)
- Feb 18 Intentional Communities (slides, lecture)
- Feb 23, 25 Bellamy, Looking Backward
- Mar 2, 4 Twain, Connecticut Yankee
- Mar 9,11 Gilman, Herland
- Mar 15-21 Spring Break
- Mar 23 World's Fairs & Pageants (slides, lecture)
- Mar 25 Second Examination
- Mar 30 The 20th-Century Shrinks Utopia: Responses to Dystopian
 Apr 1 & Eutopian Facts & Fictions
Readings: Skinner, Walden Two, Maslow, "Eupsychia" (SR)

Varieties of Contemporary Utopias

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| [Apr 10, 17 or 24] | Possible Visit to White Hawk Community |
| Apr 6,8,13 | Ambiguous Utopias <u>Reading:</u> Le Guin, <u>The Dispossessed</u> |
| <u>Apr 15</u> | <u>Reader Response Paper Due</u> |
| Apr 15,20,22 | Multi-Ethnic, Multi-gender Utopias <u>Reading:</u> Piercy, <u>Woman on the Edge of Time</u> |
| Apr 27 | Utopian Theme Parks: Disney World as Utopia? <u>Reading:</u> "Walt Disney World: A Pictorial Souvenir"; "Disney Discovers Real Life"; "Is This Tomorrow? Nah, Yesterday." (all SR) |
| Apr 29, May 4 | Utopia on the Internet (informal group discussions and workshops) |
| <u>May 6</u> | <u>Turn in Internet Reports, Review for Exam</u> |
| <u>May 11</u> | <u>Final Examination</u> |

Examinations

Each of the three examinations will consist of two parts: (1) brief questions based on the readings and class meetings; (2) essay questions relating to the types of issues raised at the conclusion of the statement of primary goals in this syllabus. Part one will be closed book. I will describe the nature of the part-two questions during the class prior to each exam. You will be allowed to bring books, notes, outlines, etc. for the essay questions. Grading criteria: thoughtful arguments consistently related to the questions and supported with appropriate examples from the readings.

Reader-Response Paper (Due April 15; approx. 2500 words)

The "paper" begins with the selection of one of the assigned book-length works. I would recommend choosing a book that evoked strong positive or negative reactions. If you think you might like to use one of the late 19th- or 20th-century utopias, "read ahead" of the assigned dates, so that you can begin the paper before mid-semester. When you think you have made your selection, I'd recommend noting down each time you have a strong positive or negative reaction to a section of the text and jotting next to the note a possible explanation for the response (e.g., immediate circumstance while reading, past courses, past reading experiences or tastes, memories of people or experiences that remind you of the characters or episodes, general political, religious, economic attitudes, etc.) When you have finished reading and note-taking, look for patterns in your notes: Do you focus on any particular parts of the text? Are there types of memories, tastes, attitudes, beliefs that influenced you repeatedly. Narrow the types of influences (transformational associations) down to the five most important influences that shaped your responses. In the paper, these patterns will correspond to five sections of the

paper. In each section (in whatever order you deem appropriate), define the nature of the influence and how that influence shaped your response (positive, negative, etc.) to particular parts of the text. Discuss the most important influence in the fifth section of the paper. In the introduction, give some indication of the type of reader you are, especially what may have shaped your attitudes toward reading. In the conclusion, indicate what you may have learned from this reading and writing experience. Grading criteria: I certainly will not be "grading" the types of influences you decide to discuss. You are the experts on those matters. I will be especially concerned about how clearly you define the influences and their relationships to your responses to the text. This may be a bit more difficult than you expect. Your "personal" influences and responses may be perfectly understandable to you, but to a reader outside your "person," they may seem vague and unimportant. Interesting and appropriate illustrations from your background and the text should help to clarify your arguments. Engaging, informative introductory and concluding sections will help. Paragraph coherence and unity and editorial matters (grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, spelling, etc.) will also be considered.

Internet Report (Due May 6; approx 750 - 1000 words)

On the first day of class I will distribute a list of Internet addresses related to utopia. Hence those students who want to surf the utopian net can begin at once. (The Ransom Hall computer facilities are open 24-hours a day.) There are many sites, including authors' home pages, chat rooms, and discussion lists. During the final two weeks of the semester we will have informal discussions about the Internet (possibly in one of the computer class rooms). During these classes, the teacher-student roles will change, since I am just beginning to enter the world of the Internet and make no pretense at being an expert (though I can direct students to professors at other universities who are Internet savvy and specialists in utopia). For the Internet report, each student will select one-to-five sources of Internet information/expression related to American utopianism. The report should address three issues: (1) how is this form of expression similar to and (2) different from the other types of sources (textual, visual, experiential) we have studied this semester? These similarities and differences may relate to the types of people entering into discussion, the types of ideals, values, and material presented, the language, images, [and sounds] used, the nature of interactions. (3) What might be some of the implications of these similarities and differences (e.g., literary, intellectual, ethical, social, political)? Grading criteria: I will particularly interested in how well you support your delineations of similarities and differences with appropriate examples and how well you relate these to the implications you present. Coherent overall organization, paragraph coherence, and editorial matters (grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, spelling, etc.) will also be considered.

Grading "Weights," Warnings, and Invitations

First exam (10%), second exam (25%), final exam (25%), reader-response paper (25%); Internet report (15%)

Warnings: (1) Dishonesty (e.g. plagiarism) will be handled according to University procedures, which can result in suspension and expulsion. UTA's graduate school on-line thesis and dissertation guideline document offers good examples of what constitutes plagiarism. (2) Professors can no longer drop students for excessive absences.

Students who want to drop must follow University procedures. In this course for every five unexcused absences, the semester grade will drop by a half-letter grade.

Invitations: (1) Consistent and constructive class participation can elevate semester grades. (2) I am very willing to work with students with disabilities. At the beginning of the semester, these students should provide me with documentation authorized by the appropriate University office.