

Utopia and Dystopia: Evaluating the Plausibility of a Perfect World

Grade Level: 10-12

Introduction

Utopian and dystopian literature are forms of speculative fiction that often share traits with science fiction due to their frequent focus on technological advances. While utopian literature fantasizes about a perfect yet unrealistic world, dystopian literature strives to demonstrate the impossibility of utopian society. Though the two genres have origins that may be traced back to centuries ago, they remain popular both in academia and in mass markets for their imaginative and compelling social commentary.

This lesson, which integrates EBSCO's Literary Reference Plus database, introduces the concept of utopia and asks students to consider the plausibility of a true utopian world based on an exploration of their own interests in relation to others. It may serve as an introductory lesson for a unit on dystopian literature like *The Giver*, *Brave New World* or *Fahrenheit 451* which expose the flaws of a seemingly utopian world.

Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2, 7, 8; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1, 2, 6; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.1, 2, 6 | NCTE 1, 3, 8

- **R.2:** Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
- **SL.1:** Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Essential Questions

1. Is utopia possible?
2. How can literature be used to critique society?

Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Define utopia.
2. Evaluate the plausibility of creating a utopian society.
3. Locate and summarize relevant information on a website.

Materials

- Computer/laptop
- Access to Literary Reference Plus

Procedure

1. Open class by having students respond to an Anticipation Guide either on paper or by moving to different sides of the room. This series of agree/disagree statements should be challenging and intriguing while addressing larger themes of the novel at hand. Encourage students to make difficult choices rather than falling in the middle. Sample statements include:

The Giver	Brave New World	Fahrenheit 451
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ignorance is bliss • We would be better off if we could erase negative memories • It is okay to lie • I am no more than my memories • Authority is necessary • Individuality is more important than social harmony • I would harm someone if it was part of my job 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We should be able to clone humans • I would prefer to not have to make choices • I do not want to age • Birth control should be practiced by everyone • We should be able to “customize” babies • If I could, I would take a pill to not experience negative emotions • The world would be better with just one government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The government has the best interests of its people in mind • We should censor dangerous information • Education is necessary for freedom • I would rather watch something than read it • More technology is better • People who break society’s laws are of low moral character. • Virtual communication is just as significant as face-to-face communication

2. Introduce the word “utopia” to students. Provide students with the opening definition of the word from *Merriam-Webster’s Encyclopedia of Literature* available on Literary Reference Plus.

Ask students to brainstorm some initial ideas for what might be found in a utopia (e.g., no crime, equality, everyone gets what they want).

3. Conduct an internet exploration activity with students in which they examine a real-life community that has attempted to create a utopian society. Students may work individually or in partners. Provide students with the attached Internet Exploration worksheet to direct their browsing. This worksheet asks the students to consider the values, industry and membership process, and style of communal living for their chosen utopian society. It also asks students to evaluate the success of the community as a utopia.
4. Place students in small groups (4-5) and provide each group with 10 strips of paper. Instruct students to come up with 10 values that they all share and would like to include in their own utopian society. Have students write these values on the strips of paper.

5. Instruct students to choose the five most important values out of the 10 they generated as a group. Then, have all groups post their top five values at the front of the room. Have students work collaboratively to categorize similar ideas.
6. Conduct a classroom discussion about the results of this activity. Did everyone get what they wanted in their utopia? Are there things on the board that someone specifically doesn't want?
7. Provide students with extended reading on the subject of utopia as a literary and historical concept. Suggested readings available on Literary Reference Plus are:
 - "From Utopia to Dystopia" by Geoffrey Luck. ("AN 93428156")
 - "Utopia" by Philip Magnier. ("AN 103331RRETH11450210000254")
 - "Utopia in Context" by Paul Kincaid. ("AN 117514101")
 - "Feminism in Literary Utopias" by Qingyun Wu. ("AN 85271580")
 - "Fahrenheit 451 and the Utopic Dystopia: Bradbury's Vision Compared to Those of More, Orwell, Huxley, Wells, and Dick" by Wolf Forrest. ("AN 101665728")

Assessment

Formative Assessment

Conduct smaller evaluations that track progress towards final unit goal. Provide students with an Exit Ticket that asks the following questions to check for understanding and critical thinking: What is a utopia? Is utopia possible? Could we create a utopia in our classroom? How might utopia function in the novel we are about to read?

Name: _____ Date: _____ Class: _____

Internet Exploration: Utopian Societies

Search the internet for a community of people trying to create a utopian society. Their vision of utopia will be reflected in their shared values and how their community operates. Fill out this exploration sheet to gain some understanding of how their society works.

1. How large is the community?

2. Name five values that the community shares:
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
 - d. _____
 - e. _____

3. What does the community provide for its members?

4. What work do the community members do? (both for business and quality of life)

5. Look for information about membership. What is the process for joining this community? What does this suggest about the seriousness of membership in the community?

6. Look for information about income sharing. What does “income sharing” mean? What else does the community share?

7. Explore around! Name two interesting things you found on their website.

a. _____

b. _____

Why does this interest you? How does it relate to utopia?

8. Wrap up

a. Would you want to live in this community? Why or why not?

b. Based on our definitions, is this community a utopia? Why or why not?