

Nothing's Perfect: The Ambiguity in the Utopia

The first work of utopian fiction was, of course, Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*. This work describes a perfect island with a perfect governance system. The name of the world itself, "utopia," comes from Greek. More combined the prefixes "ou-" (meaning no) and "eu-" (good) together, and places the word topos (for "place") after them. The resulting word therefore means no such good place. This is a location that would be great, but which does not and cannot exist. Other works in the same vein have come afterwards.

A reaction to this idea has been the creation of dystopias, or anti-utopias. As the name implies, these are completely and utterly horrible worlds. Some of the first were created in response to technological utopias, which the authors believed achievable. The dystopias, such as Zamyatin's *We*, that were created in response to those utopias demonstrate the problematic possibilities inherent in such a technological world.

A third class can be created which includes some of the worlds in each category, the worlds that have the traits of both sides of the argument. These are the "ambiguous utopias," worlds which on the surface may seem to be utopias, but which have grave problems when closely inspected. Their authors understand the problems that come in making a utopia, and they confront those issues head-on. The world may turn out for the better or the worse, but it was an attempt towards utopia.

The greatest common problem inherent in utopias is freedom. Unless the characters are inherently perfect, they do things that would muck up any world. Because of this, the people of these worlds either have strict limits on their behavior, and no power to do

anything truly important. They are often merely cogs in a machine. The loss of freedom and power causes the undesirability of these worlds. Some people might enjoy monotony, but it is almost no one's ideal. The common element of most ambiguous utopias is an overall inability of the characters either to create meaning in their lives or to affect the larger world with their actions.

Different stories represent this difficulty in a variety of ways. In Iain M. Banks' "Culture" series, machines have taken over, and people must travel out of their society to do anything meaningful. In Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, the totalitarian government has reduced overall freedom to a much lower level than today. In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, the loss of freedom is the loss of the ability to feel emotions and create works of art. In Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Dispossessed*, people have lost the ability to make great achievements and to stand out by doing great works.

Iain M. Banks knowingly created his "Culture" universe as the best world that anyone could plausibly create, though the people in this society often struggle with a lack of purpose. Banks intended the novel to be plausible and, because of its plausibility, is doomed to ambiguity. This series is a "space opera," which Banks himself has stated that he intended as a plausible utopia. The world is one of the far future, where machines rule and people live in giant rotating "orbitals," each with a surface area millions of times that of the earth. In one interview Banks explained: "The Culture is a complex, galaxy-wide human community predicated on pacifism and whose rules, in a typical piece of Banksian irony, are prepared to use dirty tricks up to and including murder to preserve the status quo. "'The Culture is my idea of a utopia,' Banks says, 'Or at least as close as you can get to utopia with what we regard as recognizably human stock'" (qtd. in Mostral) Another source quotes Banks as

saying, “It depends on how you define utopia. Is it absolutely the perfect society? In which case it’s not compatible with humanity anyway.’ ‘But if you define it as the closest to absolute perfection as one can achieve with [...] our genetic circuitry [...] then I would argue that it’s the closest thing to utopia you’re ever going to get” (qtd. in Mostral).

This utopia comes very close to perfection, but due to the fallibility of near-human nature, it cannot achieve the status of Utopia and is relegated to ambiguity. As David Horwich puts it, “The Culture is an ambiguous utopia [...] this quasi-paradise does not have universal appeal, either inside or outside the Culture”. He goes on to explain the exact problem:

The Culture’s technological prowess and political stability allows its citizens almost unlimited freedom to pursue their interests in an atmosphere of near-total security [...] the absence of threat or risk can make life seem meaningless to its citizens, or at least to the most restless or less easily satisfied types among them. (Horwich)

Many of the characters demonstrate one of the most basic problems of the Culture: an inability of people to create purpose in their lives. As one author states, “Banks’ protagonists are, for the most part, either opposed to the Culture or deeply ambivalent about its wonders “ (Horwich). Any control they would have is instead given to the Minds, supremely intelligent computers, which build themselves and run most of society: “Gurgeh is deliberately kept ignorant of SC’s [Special Circumstances’] plan in its entirety; he is used ‘like [a] game-piece,’ a pawn on the Mind’s galactic chessboard” (Horwich). The denizens of the Culture created the machines just to take away that power, and as one of the books describes, “Perhaps that was even why they had handed over so much of the running of their civilization to the machines in the first place; they didn’t trust themselves with the colossal

powers and energies their science and technology had provided them with.” (Banks, *Look to Windward*).

Life in the Culture can also be very monotonous, and as Banks describes in an essay, “Day-to-day life in the Culture varies considerably from place to place, but there is a general stability about it we might find either extremely peaceful or ultimately rather disappointing” (Banks, *Few Notes Culture*). Because of all these factors, these carefree lives disenchant a significant minority of the citizens of the Culture.

Different characters in different novels epitomize the rejection of this society. Bora Horza Gorbachul, from *Consider Phlebas*, fights for the Idirans, the enemies of the Culture, against it. As Bora says, the Idirans are “...on the side of life – boring, old-fashioned, biological life: smelly, fallible, and short-tempered, God knows, but real life. You’re ruled by your machines. You’re an evolutionary dead end” (Banks, *Consider Phlebas*). He dislikes the programmed life and the uselessness that comes from it: “The only desire the Culture could not satisfy from within itself was...the urge not to feel useless” (Horwich).

Jernau Morat Gurgeh, from *The Player of Games*, feels useless inside the Culture, and must travel outside of it to feel like he is really doing anything of value. He has discovered that in the Culture, “The absence of real meaning, the lack of real stakes other than social prestige in [Gurgeh’s] gameplaying is a reflection of the question of relevance for any member of the Culture: ‘You want something you can’t have, Gurgeh. You enjoy your life in the Culture, but it can’t provide you with sufficient threats’” (Horwich). There is no room for great individuals in the Culture, as Gurgeh himself states, “This is not a heroic age. The individual is obsolete” (Banks, *Player Games*). He finally travels out of the Culture, where everyday life seems to be an unimportant, frivolous game, to the Azad kingdom, where a

game is a matter of life and death. He is, in that sense of his game playing, stereotypical of the Culture, for they use “the rest of the Universe as their toy box” (Horwich)

Cheradenine Zakalwe, from *Use of Weapons*, is a mercenary from the outside of the Culture who must remain on its fringes in order to feel of any value. He cannot truly trust the agency of which he is a part, and they often send him to be on the predetermined losing team. When he is close to death, he describes how he loses his will to help Special Circumstances (SC): “Everything seems. . .gray at the moment. . . .nothing's worth playing for anyway” (Banks, *Use Weapons*). Nevertheless, he regains his health and goes on with his work in SC regardless. His interference in the surrounding cultures is merely a game to them.

Later novels demonstrate the results of these actions, and, in particular, *Look to Windward* describes a time in which the actions of the Culture come back to haunt them. In this book, the Culture had interfered with another culture, a regular occurrence, causing a civil war and angering that species. That other society, the Chelgrians, decides to seek revenge on the Culture, and the Culture must finally face the results of its actions. The Chelgrians decide to try to hurt the Culture back. The plot is defused, but the Culture must confront its inner desire to change the ways of others.

The Culture demonstrates the need for everyone to have a purpose and sense of meaning in his life. It is a world ruled by fashion: “The Culture recognizes, expects, and incorporates fashions [...] It can look back to time when people lived much of their lives [...] in cyberspace, and eras when people chose to alter themselves [and produce] a variety of morphological subspecies” (Banks, *Few Notes Culture*). It is also run, largely, by machines, which often feel and act as if they are playing one huge game. Due to all of these problems, a small minority of citizens inevitably reject the society and what it represents. They must

move to other places or work for Special Circumstances (SC) on the Culture's fringes. There, they can work for the foreign service and make a true difference in the lives of others. Only in SC can the inhabitants of the Culture find meaning and a sense of purpose in their otherwise pointless lives.

The author of *Utopia*, Sir Thomas More, gradually came to understand the problems inherent in creating the first "perfect world," and describes them in the later portions of this book. *Utopia* contains concepts which many people would be uncomfortable having in their society. One conflict is a seeming lack of freedom of speech: "One must guard one's tongue even when speaking of religion; and anyone who discusses politics anywhere but in the council chamber ... is put to death" (Dorsch 97).

The society is also one of uniformity and restrictiveness, and unnaturally constricting in people's choices of occupations and pursuits. People are prevented from traveling out of the city, unless they receive the permission of the economic planners and Prince. Utopia also disturbed people from its author's time, in that the "perfect world" was a pagan world and not a Christian one such as they would hope. This island also engages in wars, which, unjust or just as they may be, including such goals as "revenge" on injurers or obtaining by force what would have otherwise prevented the war. As More describes it, "The only design of the Utopian in war is to obtain that by force, which if it had been granted them in time would have prevented the war; or if that cannot be done, to take so severe a revenge [...]" (More 66).

More himself realized this problem, and accounts for it in the second book of this series. As Alistair Fox describes, "One thing we can be sure of is that, by the time More has completed his exposition of the social system of Utopia, he was thoroughly aware that his vision of an ideal state had the capacity to dissolve and reconstitute itself as its direct

opposite” (50). More does realize that people would reject this Utopia because of the extreme restrictiveness and repulsion of the land.

Because of these objections, he does address some of the land’s problems in the second book; the change in tone makes it almost seem to be a caricature of his previous ideas. More describes how this nation conquered another: for a good cause, possibly, but the intention is still ambiguous. More describes that the Utopians make slaves – unconscionable by today’s moral standards. More also believes the Utopian society must punish those people who have sexual relationships before marriage, or otherwise everyone would be going about doing it. In demonstrating all these coercive and often horrible acts, More demonstrates an understanding of some of his Utopia’s problems.

Brave New World demonstrates Aldous Huxley’s reaction against H.G. Wells’ Utopias, and is an attempt to demonstrate the problems of those societies. The society itself is an attempt, not by Huxley but by the residents, to create a Utopia. The inhabitants attempted to create a world without pain, and their motto is “Community, Identity, Stability” (Huxley 3). Few people around today would believe that these ideas are inherently a bad goal for a community. The world controllers created the society after a world war in order to prevent the occurrence of another such problem. As a whole, the new world has reduced many of the problems of today’s world, but it has cost the inhabitants their individuality and their emotional depth.

The society has given up its ability to change and do anything meaningful in return for realizing its goals. As the world controller, Mustapha Mond, says: “The machine turns and must keep on turning-for ever. It is death if it stands still. A thousand millions scabbled

the crust of the earth” (Huxley 42). The new world is “a massive socioeconomic improvisation marking the final termination of history” (Baker 97).

Another sign that the world has ground to a halt is the inability of Helmholtz Watson to create anything new of value. He continually tries to create great new works, but he cannot do so with the limited materials he is given. Strong emotions are taboo and forbidden to the inhabitants, and it is strong emotions that create the best works of art. As a result, John the Savage discovers that the New World has no works comparable to those of Shakespeare, and they have burnt all of Shakespeare’s works because the world controllers see them as destabilizing. Other sacrifices are romantic love and family, which normally engender strong emotions. A factory creates bottled people, separated from any family and predestined to a caste and job. Long-term, monogamous relationships are discouraged, and contraceptives prevent the creation of families. There is no room for emotion in this new, stable world.

The alternative to the New World, the Savage Reservation, is not appealing either. This book is not as simplistic as it seems; it is not a simple contrast between the horrible new world and an idyllic primitive world. Huxley named the primitive place “Malpais,” meaning bad place in Spanish; there is an obvious parallel to the term “dystopia.” The reservation is a simple place where life is, in fact, “nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes 89). The people have brutal ways that have cause many of the psychological troubles of both John and Linda. The tribe excludes John due to the actions of his mother, whereas the women of the tribe beat Linda for her involvements with men. The society rejected these people as strange and different, and reduced their freedoms as well. This world is just as bad in that respect as the New World. As Robert Baker explains, “Moreover, Huxley radically alters this generic convention [of contrasting utopia with dystopia] by not permitting the reader the luxury of

simple opposition, expected and easy to comprehend. Instead, the anticipated antagonism between analytic reason involves more ambiguous, less easily pigeonholed ideas” (133).

This novel depicts an ambiguous utopia because the people strive to create a Utopia and fail. They do succeed in surpassing the savage reservation, our primitive ancestry. The world may be better than the alternative, but it still is not the best possible; it is ambiguous. Huxley wrote this novel to criticize concepts of technological and pastoral utopias. The technological utopia is a stark place with no room for emotion, meaning, choice, or God. The pastoral utopia is a place of savagery, a place where few would like to live. Huxley makes the reader think about where society should go, and what its end goals should be, and he provides no easy answers.

The Dispossessed, by Ursula K. Le Guin, is the primary example of a world that strives to be a Utopia but misses the mark. It is the story of a physicist who is oppressed by his society, the anarchic, utopian Anarres and therefore travels to its opposite, the capitalistic Urras. The original anarchists create the world of Anarres to be a utopia, and it nearly reaches its mark. The world offers freedom and something resembling prosperity to many of the inhabitants of the world. The planet itself is impoverished, but the inhabitants are able to make the best of it.

There is, however, a conflict between the society and its ideal. As Le Guin writes, “there was to be no controlling center, no capital, no establishment for the self-perpetuating machinery of bureaucracy” (85). Despite that state, the world is not a true anarchy, for there is a central control center. This center must exist, or else Anarresti work would not be coordinated: “There had to be a center. The computers that coordinated the administration of things, the division of labor, and the distribution of good, and the central federatives of most

of the work syndicated, were in Abbenay, right from the start” (Le Guin 85). The demands of practicality corrupted the world from an ideal path right at the beginning.

An additional conflict is that between society and the individual. Often the society believes that an individual could help it the most by doing something that the individual does not want to do. In the novel, there is a severe drought, which means that everyone must do physical labor. Shevek, the main character of the novel, is an extraordinary physicist who believes that physical labor wastes his true talents. Compounding his problems, his revolutionary new theory of physics goes against Anarresti norms. His society does not exactly oppress him by our standards, for there are no laws, but he must do the society’s bidding anyway. Anarres has “in spite of itself [...] evolved a de facto bureaucracy based upon the assertion of custom and the pressure to conform [...] and Shevek’s theories, diverging radically from conventional Anarresti physics, are not welcome” (Strauss). In the end, he has no choice in what he must do, so he finally decides to emigrate to Anarres’ sister world of Urras, a capitalist world modeled on the United States. When he does, he finds that this world is not all it seems.

The world of Urras is, in many ways, more flawed than the world of Anarres. The world of Urras is strictly a capitalistic, competitive, hierarchical world. Shevek is alone in this new world, by himself, not understanding the world. He can not understand the oppression of the masses of people. He finds the treatment of the average person unnatural and degrading. While it may have its advantages, this world is, like Malpais, inferior to the utopia.

As a whole, the novel attempts to make a realistic portrait of a Utopia-like world. The novel often “presents an Anarran value by showing its limits. She is not saying these values

are undesirable or cannot be attained, but that there are human tendencies which may frustrate their full realization” (Brians). The world of Anarres is not perfect, but Shevek comes to realize that it is much better than the alternative. The world is near perfect, but the flaws in its construction and its ready contrast to the opposite make it merely an ambiguous utopia.

All of these worlds attempt to react to the possible flaws of a utopia, especially the most common one: a utopia greatly inhibits its inhabitants’ abilities to make important works and decisions. Even in the first modern utopian novel created, *Utopia*, the author realized the loss of freedom and responsibility of any of the utopia’s inhabitants. He writes into the second book parts about the corruption of the world. That reaction is a key part of the ambiguous utopia; the author must confront the actions of a Utopia. One of the most obvious ways of doing this is by contrasting the world with another, its opposite.

These worlds, such as the rest of the universe in the “Culture,” England in *Utopia*, Malpais in *Brave New World*, and Urras in *The Dispossessed*, are foils for the utopia. They demonstrate the Utopia’s advantages and shortcomings. While most utopias do have many important advantages over their antagonists, they always involve a loss of freedom for anyone living there. Someone must control the citizens to prevent them from running amok and ruining the glorious machine.

This control can be obvious and damaging, as in the case of *Brave New World*. There are other cases where it is an insidious and easily ignored force, such as in the Culture series and in *The Dispossessed*. They do not include the totalitarian thought-control of *Brave New World*, but through their easy life and computers, in one case, and their bureaucracy, in the other, they have taken away the significance in the lives of their inhabitants. The inhabitants

must escape from their world to its opposite to accomplish anything real, but that movement causes problems. Either choice is acceptable in this situation, but neither is perfect.

Works Cited

- Baker, Robert. Brave New World: History, Science, and Dystopia. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990.
- Banks, Iain. Consider Phlebas. London: Orbit, 1988.
- Banks, Iain. "A Few Notes on the Culture." Updated 1995. Accessed 21 February 2005 <<http://web.onetel.net.uk/~zakalwe/imb/notes.htm>>.
- Banks, Iain. Look to Windward. London: Orbit, 2000.
- Banks, Iain. The Player of Games. London: Orbit, 1989.
- Banks, Iain. Use of Weapons. London: Orbit, 1990.
- Brians, Paul. "Study Guide for Ursula LeGuin: *The Dispossessed* (1974)." Updated 2 April 2003. Accessed 18 May 2003. <http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~brians/science_fiction/dispossessed.html>.
- Dorsch, T.S. "A Detestable State." Twenty Interpretations of Utopia. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1968.
- Fox, Alistair. Utopia: An Elusive Vision. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1993.
- Horwich, David. "Culture Clash: Ambivalent Heroes and the Ambiguous Utopia in the Work of Iain M. Banks." Strange Horizons. Updated 21 January 2002. Accessed 21 February 2005 <http://www.strangehorizons.com/2002/20020121/culture_clash.shtml>.
- Hobbes, Thomas. Leviathan. N.p.: N.p., 1651.
- Huxley, Aldous. Brave New World. New York, Perennial Classics, 1932.
- Le Guin, Ursula. The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia. New York: Harpercollins, 1974.

More, Thomas. Utopia. N.p.: n.p., 1516.

Mostral. "Die Welten des Iain Banks." Updated 22 March 2005. Accessed 18 May 2005.

<<http://homepages.compuserve.de/Mostral/>>.

Strauss, Victoria. "The Dispossessed." Updated 2000. Accessed 18 May 2005.

<<http://www.sfsite.com/01b/dis73.htm>>.