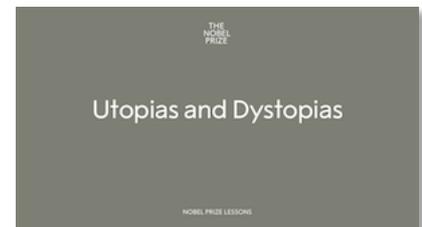


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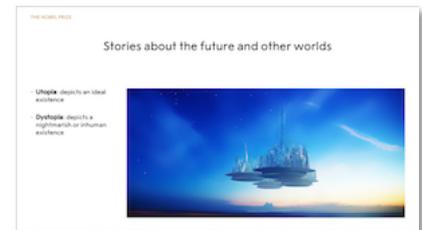
Slideshow manuscript: Utopias and Dystopias

1. Utopias and dystopias



2. Stories about the future and other worlds

- This lesson is about two literary genres: utopia and dystopia.
- *Utopia* is a literary genre that portrays an ideal society or an ideal existence, perhaps an ideal that could not possibly be realized.
- *Dystopia* is a literary genre that is the opposite of utopia. Dystopia often depicts a nightmarish existence or an inhuman future society.
- Throughout history, authors have used utopia and dystopia both to entertain their readers and to criticize their contemporary culture — utopia through appealingly positive scenarios, dystopia through terrifying ones. Over the years, some related genres have developed as well, such as science fiction and climate fiction.
- Now let's take a closer look at utopia and dystopia, starting with the one that came first: utopia.



3. Part 1: Utopias



4. Conceptions of the good life

- People have always dreamt of being able to live good, carefree and harmonious lives. The ideal existence has been described in stories and myths as well as in philosophy.
- In the Christian tradition there is Paradise: a religious conception of the original state of human existence. The very first people lived in a place of peace and harmony before being cast out into the world. The painting on the left by the Dutch artist Hieronymus Bosch shows God bringing Adam and Eve together in this paradise, the Garden of Eden.
- The Ancient Greek philosopher Plato imagined an ideal state in which justice was a fundamental principle and in which all free people had their rightful place in society –



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at least the men did, since women and slaves were not really considered in Plato's philosophy.

- In the Middle Ages, European peasants dreamed of a place known as Cockaigne, an imaginary country overflowing with food and sweets, a land of plenty where no one needed to work or struggle.

In the picture on the right, which was painted by Pieter Brügel (the Elder), we see several people sleeping off the after-effects of a big party in the land of Cockaigne.

- All of these myths and philosophies are about the dream of a good life.
- Throughout literary history, many books have been written that in various ways have explored what this ideal society and a better way to live might look like. These stories have served both as inspiration and as criticism. Sometimes society has developed in a direction first proposed as a fictional world.

5. *Utopia*: the first literary utopia

- So, stories about the good life have been around since ancient times. The literary tradition of telling stories about an ideal society begins with the lawyer and statesman Thomas More, who wrote the book *Utopia* in 1516. (Full title: *A little, true book, not less beneficial than enjoyable, about how things should be in a state and about the new island Utopia.*) More's book established the style of a popular new genre known as utopia.
- The story recounts how the author himself encounters a Portuguese sailor during his travels. The sailor tells him how he ended up on the island and in the ideal country of Utopia.
- Utopia turns out to be an exemplary place with perfect order in politics and in society. There is no private ownership, for example, and men and women have the same opportunities for education and work. This was completely different from the prevailing conditions in sixteenth-century England, where More lived, which was ruled by the House of Tudor royal family and dominated by religion. As a result, the contrast between the real world and the land of Utopia was rather dramatic, and at that time it could be dangerous to express such harsh criticism openly.



6. Utopia: the nowhere land

- The name "Utopia" is a play on words. More combined the Greek word *ouí*, which means "no", with *topia*, which means "place", to form "Utopia". Together the words mean "no place", or the nowhere country. Utopia also plays on the Greek *eu*, which means "good". Thus, a utopia can be both a good place and a place that doesn't exist anywhere.
- This was a clever way for Thomas More to deliver a sharp social critique and still avoid punishment during an age when critics were usually executed. After all, Utopia was just a fiction – it couldn't exist anywhere.
- Unfortunately, More was executed anyway twenty years later – not for writing *Utopia*, but because of the battle over who had more power, the king or God. More sided with God and was executed for it by the king.



7. Characteristics of the utopia genre

- Thomas More's work and fictional concept inspired many followers. Some utopias were written as early as the sixteenth century, and many more were published until the early twentieth century. What characteristics do these utopias have in common?
- In most of the early utopias, the main character (the hero) suddenly ends up, in one strange way or another, in an isolated place. It could be an island or a secret valley, or perhaps the hero is kidnapped and taken off to Antarctica. There he or she finds a fantastical country, a flourishing society that is portrayed realistically in some cases and in others with supernatural features. To the left we see *Peter in Blueberry Land*, in which Peter is shrunk by a tap from the Blueberry King's staff and gets to ride on mice and meet other imaginative beings in the blueberry forest. In *Gulliver's Travels* (right), a doctor named Lemuel Gulliver is shipwrecked on the island of Lilliput, which is inhabited by miniature people.
- Our hero is given a guided tour around the island by one of the locals. Of course we readers are along for the tour as well, and we're given a demonstration of how a better society could be organized.
- The contrast with the reader's own society is usually great, and that's the point.
- Utopia came to be a genre of social criticism that used imagination and visionary thinking to play with ideas about better ways of living.



8. *Herland*: a feminist utopia

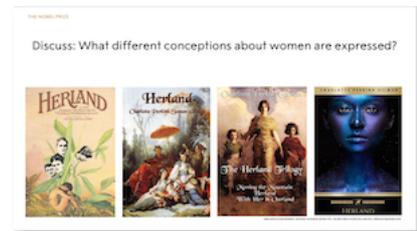
- One example of a social critical utopia is the feminist novel *Herland*, which was written in 1915 by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Gilman fought for women's rights in the United States.
- In the story, three men lose their way in a secret and inaccessible valley, where they encounter a society made up entirely of women. The inhabitants of this land of women have organised everything optimally according to democratic, aesthetic and environmentally sustainable principles. Readers get to follow the three men as they try to understand and adapt to an egalitarian and equitable existence together with the other inhabitants. Naturally they have some problems doing so.
- With this book, Gilman was able to present her ideas about equality between the sexes in a way that was simultaneously humorous, visionary and thought-provoking.
- She used Thomas More's classic "utopia recipe".
- A story in which the main character gets lost and winds up in a new and fantastical place might be called a "spatial utopia". *Herland* is a spatial utopia. The main character is still in his own world, but has come to a new and previously unknown corner of it.



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9. Discussion: book covers

- The novel *Herland* has become a feminist classic of the utopia genre. Here you can see pictures of the covers of various editions of the book from throughout the twentieth century.
- **Have students discuss in small groups:** What different conceptions of the women who live in this utopian land are expressed in these book covers?



10. Modern utopias

- Not as many utopias have been written since the early part of the twentieth century, but a few stories are worth noting.
- Ernest Callenbach's book *Ecotopia* (1975) has become a modern classic. It takes place in a parallel reality in which most of the states in the US have seceded from the union and founded their own ecological country. Readers get to follow along with the first journalist allowed into the ecological utopia, and through him we see how they created an environmentally sustainable society.
- In *Syskonplaneten* (*The Sister Planet*, 1979) by Torbjörn Engström, three drowning youths are saved by a flying saucer and taken to the utopian planet of Ani-ma. There they live in harmony with nature and have lots of adventures before returning to earth.
- Both *Ecotopia* and *Syskonplaneten* followed Thomas More's classic concept, and both depict climate-smart and sustainable worlds.
- The history of utopias is full of visionary, positive stories created to criticise various kinds of repression. Many visions of egalitarian and harmonious societies have been written.
- **Have students discuss in small groups:** What would a utopia that was written today look like?



11. Part 2: Dystopias



12. How utopia turned to dystopia

- As we have seen, utopia has a visionary function. By locating the main character in an optimal society, an author could propose things that would otherwise have been quite unthinkable at the time they were written. In *Herland*, for example, Gilman describes a society in which men and women were given equal value. The real world of 1915 was a different story entirely.



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- But if we exchange the vision of good for one of evil and replace the ideal with a nightmare in which our worst fears have come true, we get instead a *dystopia*. The picture of Paradise on the left we've seen before. It is part of a three-part work of art by Hieronymus Bosch that also includes a picture of the torments of hell.
- Like utopias, dystopias criticise tendencies in the real world, but instead of creating a positive alternative vision, dystopias take us to the logical opposite.
- Dystopias are often rooted in something frightening about contemporary society, such as new technologies like AI and surveillance cameras. Readers are then transported into the future, where they get to experience what it might be like if current developments lead to the worst possible outcome – like those technologies falling into the wrong hands.
- So utopias and dystopias are both stories that comment on our own world and criticise contemporary culture in various ways – utopias with positive visions, dystopias with nightmare scenarios.
- Now let's look at some famous dystopias from the twentieth century, and at two closely related genres.

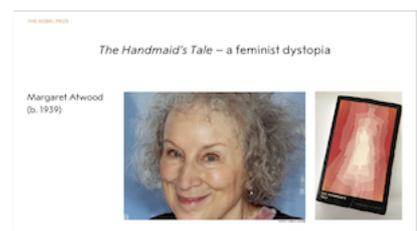
13. *1984*: a dystopian vision of a total surveillance society

- One of the most classic dystopias is George Orwell's novel *1984*. It was written in 1948, and Orwell imagined what the future might look like in the year 1984 if the worst should happen.
- The novel is set in the future of Great Britain, which has become part of the Oceania dictatorship and is governed by the controlling and manipulative "Party" under the leadership of Big Brother. The main character, Winston Smith, works in the Ministry of Truth, where he is tasked with altering history to show that the Party is always right.
- But history is not the only thing being controlled. The inhabitants are constantly monitored by screens that are always on, watching them and bombarding them with the Party's propaganda, and a new language – Newspeak – is developed to make it harder for people to think freely and critically.
- The dystopia *1984* was written shortly after the Second World War. Many aspects of the book are reminiscent of real events during the war, and Big Brother has often been compared to Soviet dictator Josef Stalin. The expressions "Big Brother is watching you" and "the Big Brother society" are still used today occasionally when discussing societies in which surveillance of citizens is used to increase control and eradicate dissent.



14. *The Handmaid's Tale*: a feminist dystopia

- One of the most widely read and recognized dystopias of recent decades is Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. It was originally published in 1985 but became topical again in 2017 when it was made into a television series.
- *The Handmaid's Tale* is about how Christian extremists take power in the United States and transform the country into a dictatorship. Women



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are no longer allowed to work, study or own things. In addition, a large portion of the population has become sterile because of environmental pollution. In response, fertile women are forced to live as so-called “handmaids”. They are sent to live with families of the society’s ruling class, where they are forced to have sex with the men in the families. If they become pregnant and give birth, the babies are taken from them.

- *The Handmaid’s Tale* has been described as a feminist dystopia because it deals with issues of women’s vulnerability and the power relationships between women and men. Atwood writes in a preface to the book that everything that happens in the story has actually occurred at some point in real life.

15. *Klara and the Sun*: about a future of artificial intelligence

- British author Kazuo Ishiguro has written several novels that explore an altered future or parallel reality. Often we find a dark world lurking beneath the surface. Ishiguro’s stories examine technologies and human abilities that could be developed with terrifying consequences. The stories are composed with great skill and permeated with understated criticism. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017.
- Ishiguro’s latest novel, *Klara and the Sun* (2021), is narrated by a humanoid named Klara, an AI friend with an extraordinary capacity for observation. Klara is sold as a companion for a sick girl, and through her narrative we eventually understand that this world is not the same as ours today. We also get to follow how Klara thinks and processes information, but also how she perceives things and what she feels. The story raises questions about artificial intelligence: What is the difference between human and artificial consciousness? And how do AIs perceive their role and purpose in relation to the world around them?
- The novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005) takes place in an alternative reality in which we get to follow a group of youths growing up in a strange boarding school. They are constantly being told how special and important they are, and later come to learn that they are clones created solely to donate their organs to others. The book was made into a film in 2010.



16. Related genres: science fiction

- The twentieth century gave us great scientific and technological progress, but also tumultuous and terrifying political events, including two world wars. As a result, the future became a frequent subject of literature both in utopias and dystopias. At the same time, the closely related genre of science fiction (sci-fi) flourished as well.
- Science fiction often depicts a far-advanced future in which man has created spaceships and established new life on other planets. By locating new technology in a fictional future world, an author can examine what consequences it might have for us.



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- H. G. Wells (1866–1944) was an early science fiction author who wrote some books that exude utopian optimism, but most of his work is full of suspicion and criticism about the direction we're headed. In his book *The War of the Worlds* (1897–98), which has been made into a movie several times, the earth is invaded by hostile aliens, and humanity is only saved in the end by a virus the spider-like monsters can't tolerate.
- In other books about new technologies and wayward scientists, Wells predicted both the aeroplane and travel to the moon. He is considered by many to be the founder of the science fiction genre. Another famous sci-fi author is Karel Čapek, who first used the word *robot* in its current meaning in his 1920 play *R.U.R.* (Rossum's Universal Robots).

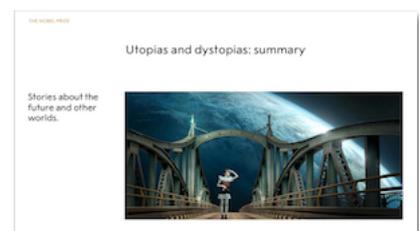
17. Related genres: climate fiction

- As climate change and its consequences for the planet have become increasingly apparent, a new genre – climate fiction – has come to the fore. Climate fiction takes a planetary perspective: climate change does not respect national boundaries.
- When climate fiction is also dystopian, the events often unfold in the future after some sudden and tumultuous change has occurred. It could be a major war over the few remaining resources, as in Suzanne Collins's (b. 1962) *Hunger Games* trilogy.
- Emmi Itäranta's (b. 1976) *Memory of Water* is set in a distant future in which everything is determined by a shortage of water. Global access to water is also the theme of Mats Söderlund's (b. 1965) exciting future fantasy trilogy of climate fiction about "the Descendants", which begins with *The Threat* and is followed by *The Struggle* and *The Escape*.



18. Utopias and dystopias: summary

- Utopia and dystopia, then, are genres with roots that go far back in literary history. Because the authors' imaginings of the future or of other possible or impossible worlds are based on real problems, their stories never stop being topical. They can be read either as imaginative entertainment or as frameworks for discussing and analysing links to challenges and problems in our own contemporary society.
- During the twentieth century, these genres have at times blended together with closely related genres such as science fiction and climate fiction, and many of the works have become literary classics.
- Now you're going to get a chance to read two short excerpts from a dystopia written by the Nobel Prize Laureate author Harry Martinson and to think about what the work can tell us about Martinson's time – and about our own.



19. Closing picture

