

Utopian Literature - Background Information for *Brave New World*

According to Greek mythology, famine, plague, and pestilence came into existence when the first woman, Pandora, opened a box given to her by the jealous gods. But this act also gave man the gift of hope. Man strives for an earthly paradise. This hope found literary expression within the genre known as the utopian novel.

Utopian literature dates back to 5th Century B.C. It was looked on as a pleasant way to teach ethics and morals.

Greeks — 2 Greek words “no place” “a good place”

- Aristophanes — *The Birds*. Utopian city in the air, meant to highlight the corruption of Athens.
- Aristotle — Discussed ideal community in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, a book that discusses ethical standards as well as illuminates the philosophical concept of the Golden Mean. In the Golden Mean, a virtue is seen as the mean (the balance point) between two extremes. Thus the virtue is a balance between two vices, one being the excess of the virtue, the other being the absence of the virtue. For example.

Cowardice	Courage	Foolhardiness
Vice (absence)	Virtue	Vice (excess)
- Plato — *The Republic*. A utopian essay about a scientifically-organized, cooperative city. There are natural rulers and natural subjects. Philosophers are the born rulers. (Similar to Mustapha Mond in BNW)

Next, warriors to keep order
Next, huge mass of workers
Children are nurtured by the state
No marriage. Wives were held in common.

English Elizabethans (Shakespeare's age)

- Sir Thomas More. *Utopia*, 1516.
Based on *The Republic*.
Crime is the result of the perverted social order. Instead of punishing crime, the state should correct those societal abuses that cause it: private ownership of property which breeds envy, greed, and crime. Property should be enjoyed by all, regardless of birth.
Setting is a utopian Island: 54 model cities.
 - Population is kept constant.
 - Agriculture is regulated.
 - Produce of the state evenly distributed to the public.
 - Love of money is discouraged.
 - Work day is short.
 - Recreation is state-sponsored and required.
 - Laws were simple and few. Therefore, no lawyers.

Renaissance: Science is liberator and universal benefactor.

- Sir Francis Bacon: *New Atlantis*, 1627. Harnessed nature to do man's bidding. Science was key in BNW, although it tended to enslave Nature rather than free man.
- Jonathan Swift: 1667-1745. *Gulliver's Travels*, 1726 .
 - Semi-utopian narrative
 - Satire attacking pettiness and grossness of man.
 - Land of tiny folks, giants, philosophers, utopian society ruled by horse-like people.
- Title of book comes from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Escapism, glorification of nature, and natural nobility are the central themes of this play. John the Savage uses Shakespeare in obtaining his entire education in conformity with nature.

Literature of Escape:

Simplify personal wants
Live with Nature

- Jean-Jacques Rousseau: 18th century philosopher. "Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains." *Social Contract*, 1762.
Blamed all misery on over-civilization
Championship of the noble savage [John, in BNW]
- Henry David Thoreau: *Walden*.
Retreating to Nature and the natural state. Least government is the best government. This is similar to John's retreat at the end of BNW.

Late 19th & Early 20th Century

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many felt scientific and social progress heralded the approach of the new perfected world order. Social security, labor unions, mass literacy seemed promising. WWI brought disillusionment.

Socialist revolution in Russia changed into totalitarianism. League of Nations failed. Hitler and Mussolini came into power. The stock market collapsed. Depression, WWII. Science was perverted and turned toward finding new methods of torture and brainwashing. The atom bomb was created. Increasing pessimism about the future.

Anti-Utopian novel. Bleak predictions about the future.

George Orwell. 1984. World Controlled by fear.
Lord of the Flies.

Following the 1600s new experimental Utopias. Some had religious affiliations.

Mennonites	Cooperative economies, discouraged private property, experimental family relationships. If they lasted, they modified.
Shakers	
Mormons	
Zionists	

20th Century

Flood of utopian novels. Mostly technological. Most were naive glorification of mechanical progress.

H.G. Wells - *The Time Machine*. Earth divided between master race and servants.

War of the Worlds. Reason would triumph over instinct. Orson Wells radio broadcast of this in the 1940s caused mayhem in America as citizens fled New York fearing an alien (outer space) invasion.

The Shape of Things to Come. 1933. Condemns capitalism

James Hilton - *Lost Horizon*.

Return to natural. Wonderful life. Shangri-La.

George Orwell - *Animal Farm*, 1946. Life under a dictator.

1984, written in 1948. Big Brother. Again life with a dictator. Power becomes autocracy and self-perpetuating. Very similar in themes, concept to BNW.

The title of this book has made it seem obsolete; yet Orwell's concept of "Big Brother" is very credible today.

Movies: What movies can you think of that fall into the utopian/dystopian classifications?