Utopias, Dystopias, and the American Dream

DIRECTIONS: Open the answer document. In that document, you will write all your answers so it is not as cluttered as this page.

Utopias: Origins and Prevalence in American Ideology
1. Go to dictionary.com and look at all the entries of “Utopia”. Based on the etymology of the word, how does Sir Thomas More feel about the possibilities of a utopia happening in real life?

2. The copy of Utopia in the Library of Congress comes from Thomas Jefferson’s own personal library. Jefferson is also credited with writing the original draft of the United State Declaration of Independence. Here is an excerpt from that document:

   We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

   Using MS Word processor synonym look up, thesaurus.com, and your own reasoning rewrite the sentence above using synonym or synonym phrases for the words in red.

3. Looking at this statement, how does this sentiment fit with utopian ideals?

4. Go to http://brbl-archive.library.yale.edu/exhibitions/utopia/. Read the first two paragraphs in the “introduction” tab and look at the list of “Utopian Communities”. What about America and the foundational beliefs of America - prior to it even being its own country - lends itself to so many utopian communities and utopian literature?

5. Select two of the Utopian Communities that were founded at least a hundred years apart. Compare and contrast them including: location, founder, time period, basis for society, successes and failures, etc.

6. Read the lyrics to John Lennon’s “Imagine” in which John Lennon asks the listener to imagine a perfect world. Lennon, one of the Beatles, recorded the song in 1971. The decade prior, 1960’s was riddled with turmoil: Cold War, Vietnam War, Civil Rights Movement, assassination of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, numerous protests to gain workers rights, equality for women and minorities, and against nuclear armament. Use the “review” tool comments in order to annotate the song by selecting a portion of the text and explaining how it would fix these problems he saw in the 60’s. A sample has been done for you.*

   * This was a highly controversial idea for the time and still is. However, religious beliefs or lack thereof are an important component of utopian/dystopian literature. There are many people who tried to make their world better by requiring everyone believe the same religious doctrine (like in the Crusades) as well as people who tried to stomp out religion all together (like Hitler). If this idea is shocking to you, remember it as we go through out dystopian unit and examine the role faith plays in the text.

7. Now go look at the video for “Imagine”. Pick three choices the director and John Lennon and his wife, Yoko Ono, made in the video. (Lennon and Ono are the two people in the video.) Below, explain the three choices you want to analyze and explain the effect the director had in relation to
the purpose of the song. Choices may include: the white walls, opening the windows to let in the lighting, the fading of the people or the sign, etc.

8-10. How would you make a perfect world? Pretend you have full power to make the world a utopia. Think of all of the world’s ills: racism, poverty, unemployment, overpopulation, religious intolerance, war, hunger, violence, etc. Come up with THREE laws/rules you would need to make in order to rid the world of this issue. You, of course, are being hypothetical and do not necessarily mean what you are saying. However, make sure your comments are appropriate for school. Hate-filled speech is never okay.

**Dystopias: dreams deferred**

11-13. The American Dream is the belief that a person in America — regardless of the circumstances of their birth — can achieve success. It is this utopian idea that caused so many people to come to America for a better future. However, in the real world nothing is truly perfect, which gives us the idea of dystopia.

The prefix “dys” means “apart, away, negative, bad.” We use it in words like “dysfunctional” or “disappear.” When paired with “utopia” to give us “dystopia,” we have an image of a place that is the opposite of ideal, or ideal gone bad.

Read Langston Hughes’s poem “Harlem”. [http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/175884](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/175884) Look at the similes in the poem. Fill out the chart:

14. Hughes wrote this poem in 1951. Reflect upon the decades between the abolishment of slavery and the passing of the Civil Rights Act. What is the dream many African-Americans had that was being deferred when this poem was written?

15. What events could be considered part of the “explosion” that Hughes foresaw?

Thomas Cole, a famous American painter, created a series of works entitled *The Course of the Empire* inspired by a poem by Lord Byron who wrote in part:

> There is the moral of all human tales;  
> This but the same rehearsal of the past

> First Freedom, and then Glory: when that fails  
> Wealth, vice, corruption

16. How does Byron’s excerpt explain the relationship between utopias and dystopias?

Look through the paintings and think about the titles of each.

**Painting Number 1:** The Course of the Empire — Savage State: [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5b/Cole_Thomas_The_Course_of_Empire_The_Savage_State_1836.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5b/Cole_Thomas_The_Course_of_Empire_The_Savage_State_1836.jpg)

**Painting Number 2:** The Course of the Empire — Pastoral State [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8c/Cole_Thomas_The_Course_of_Empire_The_Arcadian_or_Pastoral_State_1836.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8c/Cole_Thomas_The_Course_of_Empire_The_Arcadian_or_Pastoral_State_1836.jpg)
17. How does Cole’s use the mountain and sun in each of these paintings to make his point?

18. Looking at “Destruction”, what symbolic elements do you notice?

19. Which painting is the most utopic to you? Which the most dystopic? And which stage do you believe America is currently in.

20. Look back at your answers for 8-10. Identify the rule that would most likely lead to the utopia turning into a dystopia. What is the law and why is this the most dangerous?