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*Utopia* by Thomas More: Is *Utopia* an Actual Utopia?

A utopia is usually described as a perfect community or society that possesses desirable qualities for all its members. Thomas More's *Utopia* attempts to embody this idea, yet falls short in some respects. A classic utopia is defined by five characteristics: independent thought is promoted, a figurehead brings the citizens together but is not glorified, citizens embrace social and moral ideals of equality, impartial access to healthcare, education, work, etc., and a world void of fear. While *Utopia* by Thomas More checks off all these boxes with a broad scope, when evaluated at a deeper level, this perfect society isn't as perfect as it may seem. In *Utopian Studies*, Pavla Veselá mentions the views of a fellow scholar Svoboda who "proposes that certain of More's propositions were jokes, namely, generic religion with common service for all, female priests, euthanasia... and the attitude of the Utopians toward their enemies." (Veselá Vol. 27 No.3). Many seem to agree that based on the simple parameters of a defined utopian society, *Utopia* by Thomas More misses the mark.

On the surface level, it seems that the Utopians encourage essential liberties such as freedom of thought and religion. Yet More showcases a limitation by initially stating that "one of the most ancient principles of their (The Utopians) constitution is religious toleration" yet later follows this by saying that those who refrain from any religious practice "are regarded as utterly contemptible." (More

100-101). While all religious practices are fully allowed in Utopia, those who lack a religious belief are condemned for it and are excluded from public debate on the matter. Religious toleration, an ideal that the Utopians supposedly possess, is the acceptance of differing opinions. If they refuse to hear from the opposing standpoint, that is not toleration, but rather a show of negligence towards a conflicting view. Vivien Green even goes as far as labeling this as fascism in her article *Utopia/Dystopia* stating that, “Thomas More in his *Utopia* (1516), conjures an isolated island to describe a better world but one that in hindsight sounds fascist, prescient now that the twentieth century is over.” (Green Vol. 25 No. 2). She then goes on to explain how texts like this suffocate independent thought in favor of an unattainable fairy tale. This restriction of independent thought prevents *Utopia* from actually being a utopian society. In an ideal utopia, independent thought should be fully endorsed, not cast aside if it differs from the majority’s opinion.

The next point broken in *Utopia* is the idea that for an ideal society to exist, the leader(s) must be viewed as equals. Claiming there is equality and actually proving it in practice are two entirely different things. They claim food is distributed equally and fairly, but in the dining hall the elite sit at “the place of honour in the centre of the high table, which is on a platform across the end of the hall, and so commands a view of the whole company.” (More 63). The elite consists of the Styward who is an community’s elected official and his wife, as well as the community’s two eldest members and the priest and his wife; all of which receive the best helpings. This is based on the principle that the elderly have earned respect and in turn the benefits of a long life; yet doesn’t this constitute as glorification? In a society void of money, jewels, and other normalized valuables, food and resources are the only objects

of importance. By giving the classic English upper class– political leaders and religious officials– the benefits of an unmaterialistic society, the Utopians are contradicting one of the fundamental ideas of a utopian society.

Furthermore, although Thomas More's *Utopia* embodies some radical ideas for that time period, the ideal of equality is found to be void, as women do not possess the same importance as men. For the sake of argument, *Utopia* does support certain forms of gender equality. Women are allowed to have their own occupations, share the household chores, and are even able to become priests. Yet these small freedoms have their own restrictions. Women have their own separate occupations from the men, but are limited to labor that is not heavy such as sewing and gardening. Even when it comes to the community meals, it is up to the women, not the men, to prepare the food with the help of slaves. More states that the "business of preparing and cooking the food, and planning the meals, is left entirely to the women of the household on duty." (More 62). Men are fully capable of helping with meals, especially since both genders have jobs outside of cooking. The most radical out of these ideas is that women can become priests. Yet even that has a catch: they have to be widowed. Every single "freedom" that women are given is limited to a certain degree. While these ideas were revolutionary when *Utopia* was written, this unequal system does not constitute as a utopia by violating the social ideals of equality.

For this next parameter, Thomas More nearly succeeded. All citizens seemingly have impartial access to healthcare, work, and an education. All cities have five hospitals for medical needs with optional euthanasia for the deadly ill and easy access to any job one may desire, with the youth having

unlimited options instead of taking up their parent's trade. While every citizen has complete access to education, only some are allowed to further develop their knowledge in an academic setting. "No one's allowed to become a full-time student, except for the very few in town who appear as children to possess unusual gifts, outstanding intelligence, and a special aptitude," More states on the issue. (More 70). Education is how progress is made. The influx of new ideas is what creates a better society for future generations. By limiting those allowed to continue their education into adulthood, the Utopians are constricting the advancement of their cities. Even judging a student's worth as a child is absurd as some scholars are not able to show their full potential at a young age. More does justify this flaw by explaining how most Utopians prefer to read and learn in their leisure time, which may account for the constraints of education. All-in-all this requirement of an ideal utopian society is practically fulfilled in comparison to the other conditions.

Last but not least, a utopian society by definition is reliant on a constant state of peace. Thomas More's *Utopia* appears safe from internal civil war, but they do encounter external wars with other countries. Nevertheless, they will fight, women and men alike, but will also send a mercenary to kill the commanding general of the battle to avoid mass loss. In this way, More accepts that dispute is inevitable, yet the Utopians deal with the matter in the most peaceful and efficient way they can. This portrayal of an almost entirely peaceful society nearly fits the parameters of a utopian world, but falls just short of perfection. Utopia showcases a better world than what Thomas More was living in, but it's not enough to be considered a definable utopia.

With scholars such as Svoboda and Vivien Green seeing Thomas More's ideas as "jokes" and Pavla Veselá labeling it as a fascist society, it seems a far stretch to call *Utopia* an actual utopia. A utopian society is distinguished by five basic principles, and if one is not met then it is unable to claim that title. Thomas More created a society that was far better than the one he lived in, but that does not imply that his fictional *Utopia* can even be labeled as a definable utopia.

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