

Literary utopias: literal hells?

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Abstract: Literary works suggest that no utopia can exist without geographical barriers to isolate the given society from the rest of the world and, therefore, to protect it from influences that will lead to change. Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* is isolated by water and protective geography. James Hilton's Shangri-La of *Lost Horizon* is hidden in mountains. John Wyndham's "civilized" society in *The Chrysalids* is restricted to the land least affected by nuclear disaster. Lois Lowry's towns in *The Giver* exist only on human-manipulated landscape, in which "Sameness" has been introduced; there are no hills, weather variations or colour. The societies of these four geographically rich works, the main topics of discussion in this paper, resist outside influences to varying degrees, some being more "kinetic," more willing to accept change, than others. Their isolated geographies are major factors enabling them to control which changes occur. However, this control is challenged in some of the works. These four books also assert a second important suggestion about utopias; no place is utopian for all who live in it. Each book has characters that suffer, often as a result of geographic isolation, their suffering ensuring that the perceived utopia will continue for the rest of the characters. These sacrifices imply that the Greek translation of the word utopia, "no place," holds true. A true utopia can never exist, for there will always be someone who finds a situation or environment unpleasant.

Introduction

From the time the story of the garden of Eden was recorded, humans have heard of idyllic lands and cultures and compared them to their own, less desirable, environments. Even in Genesis, in which the world and, therefore, geography itself is created, geography is viewed as merely a backdrop to the morality and obedience lesson in Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve are expelled from Eden. The geography is present; in many interpretations of the garden, Eden has four rivers – Pison, Gihon, Hiddekel and Euphrates; it has an abundance of gold, myrrh and onyx; like most

utopias, it evidently has boundaries, for God drives Adam and Eve out of the garden and blocks re-entry (Snodgrass 1995). Yet despite the abundance of fascinating, rich geography, the landscape is like the wallpaper of a room; more attention is paid to the room's inhabitants and their actions than to their surroundings.

Geography as a backdrop is typical of most utopias. In nearly all criticism of utopian literature, geography is secondary to government, law, social organization and morality, which are all seen as more central to a culture. In his paper on More's work, Goodney (1970) even goes as far as to say: "*Utopia* was not written as a geography. The locale of More's society is almost incidental to the social structure that he describes..." (18).

While the characteristics of a utopia are no doubt affected a great deal by government, law and other factors, geography should not be dismissed as merely "incidental." Generalized studies of geography in utopian literature have been published, but they rarely delve deeply into *specific* works, nor do they compare and contrast the geography of different utopian works. The exceptions to this observation are perhaps classic works such as Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, which have had time to accumulate criticism in all areas, including geography, although for *Utopia* much of this criticism has centred not around the physical geography of the island but on its location on the globe (Parks 1938; Plank 1964; Goodney 1970; Lakowski 1999a; Lakowski 1999b). Contemporary literature does not appear to have been as thoroughly analyzed for its geography. This paper will consider the importance of boundaries, isolation and resistance to external influences in the works considered and how geography contributes to these elements. It will also consider the static nature of many literary utopias and how this fixed state can lead to some characters in literary utopias to feel that their situation is dystopian. While the geographical argument is not meant to be deterministic, a survey of literary utopias both by extensive reading and consulting of literary anthologies and bibliographies (Snodgrass 1995; Claeys and Sargent 1999) suggested that geography is, more often than not, a major factor in a utopian, or dystopian, culture's development and continuation.

In this paper, Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1992), James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* (1962), Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993) and John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids* (1955) will exemplify the above elements of geography in utopias. Other works will also be touched on to elucidate points. Where appropriate, a discussion of real world events that inspired the creation of literary utopias, such as the exploration of the Americas and the Cold War will also be considered.

Geography of Utopias

Geographically, utopias can be found on almost any terrain. More's *Utopia*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1946), the four lands of *Gulliver's Travels* (Swift 1965) and a litany of others all take place on islands. *Lost Horizon's* Shangri-La is found on the Asian continent, but in the Tibetan mountains. The prairies of North America, with "boundaries" of seemingly endless open space, were presented in utopian ways in the late 1800s and early 1900s. John Varley's *The Barbie Murders* (1980), in which an entire colony is identical and ideally beautiful, takes place on the moon. The 1998 movie *Pleasantville* even gets temporally displaced when two teenagers from the 1990's are transported into a 1950's black and white mid-American town with wholesome, "Leave It to Beaver," values. However, in one respect, nearly all utopias and dystopias are similar; they are almost all isolated. "Ever since More described his island Utopia, boundaries, walls, trenches, moats, and a variety of other spatial and temporal barriers have been indispensable features on subsequent maps of utopia," explains Ruppert (1986, 27).

Utopias could not exist without such boundaries, explain Lukermann and Porter (1976). "Utopia cannot survive in proximity to an alternative way of life," they claim (207). Ruppert (1986) echoes this assertion, writing that the function of boundaries is twofold: they protect the society inside the boundaries from outside influence and contamination, but they also "keep docile and unknowing inhabitants within" (27). "In protecting the utopian territory, these boundaries also isolate and insulate it, cutting it off from the rest of human society and transforming it into a static place that seems incapable of change, novelty and innovation," he explains (27). As will be discussed later, the inhabitants of the Valley of the Blue Moon in *Lost Horizon* are ignorant to anything outside their mountain walls, while citizens in *The Giver* have no memories of the past and, therefore, have no alternatives on which to look back. Both of these societies are ignorant of other possible ways of living, largely due to their boundaries.

Utopian societies tend to be isolationist because the influence of other societies can cause change. Change disrupts utopias, which have already attained the ideal. Therefore, to change means to move away from utopia. "Because the consequences cannot be foreseen, any change threatens the equilibrium of a system. In utopia nothing is left to chance. Relations with the outside world, for example, are carefully regulated," explain Lukermann and Porter (1976, 206). This caution can certainly be found in *Lost Horizon*, in which newcomers are welcomed with great hospitality, but are later told that they can never leave, for fear of revealing

the location of Shangri-La (134). Similarly, in *The Chrysalids*, “norms,” the people who are not seen as deviations, keep themselves geographically separated from mutants. They believe that allowing mutants into their society would lead to the destruction of the utopia towards which they are working because the gene pool would be contaminated. They are fearful of change that leads them away from their pursuit of returning to what they believe is “The Golden Age” (40). This resistance to change is common among utopias. “Utopias are static, virtually by definition. Having worked so hard to achieve a society in which there are no serious problems, the citizens of utopia want things to stay pretty much the way they are. Change essentially becomes the enemy,” says Levy (1997, 53).

However, one character in particular in *The Chrysalids* (Wyndham 1955), the woman from Sealand (New Zealand), insists that it is resistance to change that is dangerous. “The living form defies evolution at its peril; if it does not adapt, it will be broken. The idea of completed man is the supreme vanity: the finished image is the sacrilegious myth,” she says (182). While she, a character whom we do not meet face-to-face until the last chapter, lives in a society that accepts evolution, the main characters live in post-nuclear Labrador, Canada, where human “mutants” are banished. This latter society is striving to re-attain the “Golden Age” of the “Old People”; this “Golden Age” is thinly-disguised as Wyndham’s real-life Cold War world. The evolutionary views of the Sealanders relate to what has been termed “kinetic” utopias, as opposed to “static” ones (Wells 1905; Partington 2000; Partington 2002). It is not a new way of considering utopias; H.G. Wells discussed kinetic utopias in *A Modern Utopia* (1905), writing that Darwinian influence had led from “static states” of utopia to a new utopian concept in which a utopia “must be not static but kinetic, must shape not as a permanent state but as a hopeful stage, leading to a long ascent of stages” (Wells 1905, 5). Writes Partington (2002) of Wells’ insight: “The responsibility of one generation, therefore, is to provide the best opportunities and conditions for the next generation to build upon and succeed, and such a responsibility will rest with all future generations of human beings *ad infinitum*... Unlike all other utopias before *A Modern Utopia*, Wells strives not for material perfection in the here and now, nor for spiritual perfection in the afterlife, but for continuous racial advancement” (65).

The Sealanders of *The Chrysalids* (Wyndham 1955) hold an evolutionary view that all living things move from stage to stage. Says the Sealand woman with whom the main characters are in telepathic contact: “The essential quality of life is living; the essential quality of living is change; change is evolution; and we are part of it. The static, the enemy of change, is the enemy of life, and therefore our implacable enemy.” (196).

Even the Sealanders themselves accept that their civilization will be succeeded by another one day (195).

Geography and its related disciplines are some of the reasons that change is always in the future for any society. McConnell (1981) writes, "the environment will inevitably change over the course of geological, cosmological time. And the species that has become too at home in one phase of climate and ecology will probably lose the resiliency to change and meet the demands of another phase" (as qtd. in Partington 2002, 67).

Utopias written in the 1900s after the concept of the kinetic utopia was born often maintained the static tradition. However, as will be discussed throughout this paper, these utopias often had dystopian currents related to their rigid natures. Father Perrault, High Lama at Shangri-La in *Lost Horizon* (Hilton 1962), claims that their society is flexible, pointing to their use of an airplane to kidnap new residents as evidence that even their isolated enclave evolves. He says that "...we must move with the times, you know, even at Shangri-La" (138). This statement could be intended as ironic, at least by the author, since Father Perrault created Shangri-La because he has foreseen that a horrible war, in which flight will play a major role, will destroy everything beautiful in the world. Therefore, he and the other residents amass and protect art, books, knowledge and other things of beauty, including people of many different ethnic backgrounds, at their hidden home. He explains to Conway, the protagonist to whom he bequeaths Shangri-La when he dies, "We may expect no mercy, but we may faintly hope for neglect. Here we shall stay with our books and our music and our meditations, conserving the frail elegancies of a dying age, and seeking such wisdom as men will need when their passions are all spent. We have a heritage to cherish and bequeath" (145). As will be discussed later, Father Perrault hopes they will be successful due to the fact that the lamasery is so isolated. He believes that when the war ends, "...a new world [will stir] in the ruins, stirring clumsily but in hopefulness, seeking its lost and legendary treasures. And they will be here, my son, hidden behind the mountains in the valley of the Blue Moon, preserved as by miracle for a new Renaissance..." (181). His hope to preserve art and knowledge is similar to how the Waknuk people in *The Chrysalids* (Wyndham 1955) are trying to re-acquire all of the knowledge possessed by the Old People. Using *The Bible*, the one book that survived "Tribulation," a disaster which the reader recognizes as nuclear war, they try to rebuild the Old People's civilization. Were they to find a secluded place where the knowledge and art of the Old People had been preserved, such as a Shangri-La, they could very well be eager to use it to re-build their world and, one might worry, make the same errors.

The world of *The Giver* (Lowry 1993) is perhaps the most static and controlled of those considered in this paper. Any proposed social change in society goes to a “committee” which will consider the change; it is a running joke in the community that “the committee members would become Elders by the time the rule change was made” (14). The community cannot adapt to anything new – when a plane unexpectedly flies overhead, simply because its pilot lost his way, citizens stop all activity and chaos takes over until the airplane is explained (2). They are incapable of change because of their society’s choice to have their Receiver, the protagonist Jonas’s mentor, hold all of their community’s memories – for instance of war and planes. Only The Receiver has the ability to deal with the unexpected; he provides guidance to the community. This particular arrangement will be discussed later in this essay. At the moment, it is enough to note that Jonas’s community starts to move from static to kinetic at the end of the book, when Jonas flees the community and the memories which he holds are no longer imprisoned in his mind as his distance from the community increases. As he crosses the bridge over the river, a physical boundary for the community, he looks back and reflects; “At dawn, the orderly, disciplined life he had always known would continue again, without him. The life where nothing was ever unexpected. Or inconvenient. Or unusual. The life without colour, pain, or past” (165). His departure will change that stagnant scene. He can only hold the memories, and protect people from the feelings they carry, as long as he lives in the community. By leaving, he forces change onto his community; he obliges them to acquire wisdom.

Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1992) was written in 1516, long before the concept of kinetic utopias consciously existed in literature. The society is largely static in its organization but it does have a few kinetic elements. Perhaps most notably, the Utopians welcome outsiders and have even adopted a few technological advances from visitors. In this way, the Utopians do not follow the more common isolationist natures of many utopian societies. They embraced some knowledge, not identified specifically by More, when Romans and Egyptians arrived in their land 1,200 years before *Utopia*’s character, Hythloday, visited the land (30). Then, when Hythloday arrived, the society learned how to make paper from him (59). As More writes it, Utopians are not affected by the vices of any visiting culture; they only adopt that which is useful and beneficial. Says Hythloday of this adaptability: “The willingness to learn, I think, is the really important reason for their being better governed and living more happily than we do, though we are not inferior to them in brains or resources” (30). Since More’s *Utopia* is generally regarded as a static society, and Wells (1905) criticized it for being such, such evidence of the kinetic should be mentioned. However, the society’s ability to screen out

the bad from the good is perhaps unrealistic. Utopians trade with other societies, establish colonies off their island and receive government delegations from elsewhere. Any visitor to the island who has traveled is warmly welcomed because the Utopians “love to hear what is happening throughout the world” (59). One wants to ask why and how Utopia’s citizens are so curious and yet so unshakably resistant to outside influence? More presents an island society that, while geographically isolated from the outside world, still has a lot of contact with other cultures. Perhaps he wants the reader to conclude that the Utopian civilization is so superior to these other societies that no citizen would see another place as better; however, this paper will later discuss characteristics of *Utopia* that might drive at least some Utopians to want change.

Utopias and Dystopias on the Prairies

There are, however, also utopias which are mostly nostalgic visions of people displaced in today’s society, as for example, aboriginals on the prairies. Added to these people wistful for a past gone forever, are people duped into coming to a geographical heaven which turned into a living hell for some unprepared prairie immigrants. Before the abovementioned works are given in-depth consideration, utopian works set on the prairies can be considered in order to discuss the boundless open space of this North American region. The seemingly endless land of the prairies in the middle of a continent provides the geographic isolation for utopias and dystopias in this setting.

Before Europeans came to North America, Native North Americans had already created their own utopian ideas based on the prairies. These stories were not in written form, but rather were oral. For example, just as the creation story of the biblical Eden has utopian elements, so too do many North American Aboriginal creation stories. In *The Garden of the Manitou*, Symons (1973) puts in writing a story told to him by “the last great Medicine Man of the Cree,” Morning Star. The story tells of the creation of the prairie by the spirit Weesahkahchak who said, “this shall be a prairie and a grassland and a pasture. This shall be the Garden of the Manitou. It is good.” (as qtd. in MacDonald 2007, 74). This story explains that, for a time, humans lived in harmony with nature, sharing and taking only what they needed. However, this harmony was broken when the people of the “pale visage,” Europeans, arrived and declared “a war against the garden” (74).

bushes?” (3). Indeed, many immigrants expected the extraordinary, because the geography of the prairies had been misrepresented to greater and lesser degrees by a great deal of the information available to prospective immigrants in Europe.

More's Utopia

In More's *Utopia* (1992), no one is duped into coming and staying. His utopia is in full bloom when he lays out its geographical boundaries. This literary work catapulted the term “Utopia” into common vocabulary. “Utopia” is a combination of the Greek *ou* and *topos*, meaning “no place” (3). Translator Adams also suggests it may be a pun on *eutopos*, meaning “good place” (3).

In Book Two of *Utopia*, More lays out the geography of his fictional land in a straightforward manner. While there is much to be said about urban geography, the intent here is to concentrate on the significance of Utopia's physical geography. The island of Utopia is “two hundred miles across in the middle part where it is widest, and is nowhere much narrower than this except towards the two ends. These ends, drawn toward one another as if in a five-hundred-mile circle, make the island crescent-shaped like a new moon” (31). It is important to note the symbolism built into this geography. First, the island is in the shape of a womb. Therefore, the connotation of the birth of a more just society is provided. The description of Utopia as a “new moon” also appears to be symbolic of birth. Again, More may be intending readers to connect Utopia with hope for the existence of an idyllic land – an escape from England. After all, More could have easily identified Utopia as a “waning moon, about to fade to black,” but the romantic, appealing, hopeful connotation would then, of course, be utterly obliterated. Instead, it would have suggested a wilting society past its Golden Age.

The moon-shaped island forms a bay which conveniently provides Utopians with a quiet, smooth, lake-like water body. This bay also provides protection, for its entrance is bordered by rocks and shallow waters and is loaded with underground rocks that are difficult to navigate around; only Utopians are able to find their way to the inner bay. Therefore, the interior of Utopia is safe from invasion by water. Hythloday, the narrator of the story, suggests that the island may have once been part of the continent until King Utopus, the conqueror of the land, “brought its rude and uncouth inhabitants to such a high level of culture and humanity that they now excel in that regard almost every other people,” and then “cut a channel

fifteen miles wide where their land joined the continent, and caused the sea to flow around the country” (31).

One interesting geographic choice made by More is to create numerous similarities between Utopia and his homeland of England. The most obvious parallel is in the size of the islands. As previously mentioned, Utopia is two hundred miles wide, similar to that of the British Isles; it is approximately two hundred miles from the Norfolk coast of East Anglia to the northern part of the British border with Wales. Second, the description of the coastline of Utopia is similar to England’s. For instance, both have the remains of coastal castles used for defense and “guarded river and bay entrances” (31). Third, the channel that separates Utopia from the continent certainly has a counterpart in England: the English Channel. The Utopian channel is fifteen miles wide while the English channel, at its most narrow, is twenty-one miles wide (19). Erasmus, a friend and fellow writer of More’s, indicated that More consciously based Utopia on England. Perhaps More, who many believe intended *Utopia* to be a satire on life in England, wanted to provide obvious geographical clues to readers that had England taken another path, it could resemble his fictional island paradise.

Since More’s work was written, scholars and general readers alike have tried to pinpoint the exact location of Utopia. Amusingly, Utopia has proven to live up to its Greek meaning of being “no place.” No consensus has been reached as to the “real” location of Utopia (or where More intended it to be).

One common view is that Utopia was inspired by the tales of exploration to the Americas, which were discovered less than twenty-five years before *Utopia* was published (viii). “Naïve folk of the early sixteenth century swallowed More’s account of Utopia as a fair description of the New World,” writes translator and editor, Adams (viii). However, other scholars dispute this assertion.

Lakowski (1999) challenges the view in two essays which argue that “India and Ceylon in particular served as prototypes for the fictional geography of Utopia” (1). He provides numerous points, some of them stronger than others. For instance, he points out that Hythloday tells that the Utopians had come in contact with the Romans and the Egyptians. “He cites an incident in which a ship, manned by Roman and Egyptian sailors had been shipwrecked on the coast of Utopia twelve hundred years beforehand,” (8). This geography would certainly suggest that the Romans and Egyptians had traversed the Indian Ocean, rather than the Atlantic.

A third point of view is presented by Parks (1938) who, before reaching a conclusion, considers many points of view of Utopia’s location, including

the possibilities that it was north, south or west of Brazil, Hythloday's original landing place. Through his analysis, he concludes that Utopia could be best located in the East Indies. He argues that, since Hythloday's numerous boat voyages after he left Brazil were relatively short (such as the 500 mile trip from Utopia to the land of the Zapoletes), they imply a chain of islands, such as the East Indies. Parks further explains his conclusion through the use of classical geography, which divides the earth into five zones, "two polar, two temperate and one tropical" (234). Classical geographers believed that the zone in which a society is found determines its level of civilization. Tropical societies were savage while temperate ones were "civilized and intelligent." With his knowledge of human populations in the northern hemisphere, More mirrored the classical belief onto the southern hemisphere. "Now that the south temperate zone was known to be inhabited, More boldly concluded that it must be inhabited by civilized peoples," explains Parks (235), labelling this projection as "climatic symmetry" (236). Moreover, he effectively supports his argument by describing the evolving styles of boats on which Hythloday travelled as he moved, presumably, to higher latitudes. In the sub-tropics, boats were primitive, "flat-bottomed and furnished with sails of wicker or even leather." Later, they were "ridge-keeled." Finally, they were "like ours" (236). These advancements in technology corroborate the classical view.

Of the four works to be discussed, *Utopia* has the fewest dystopian elements. Through his writing, More makes a strong case for his fictional land being more desirable than its real-life counter-part, England. People only work six hours a day, money does not exist and so does not cause conflict, nobody is poor or homeless and freedom of religion is allowed. Despite the many wondrous social conditions, slaves are still present in More's Utopia, and they are the main example of Utopian residents for whom the land would not be ideal (not that More necessarily meant their existence to be a criticism, given the time period). Slaves are "kept constantly at work, and are always fettered" (59). In addition, they wear chains and jewelry of gold, a "mark of disgrace" in utopia. However, these slaves were not born into slavery; they are prisoners of war, former citizens who committed crimes, or "men of other nations who were condemned to death in their own land" (59). The latter in particular *almost* makes this slavery an act of compassion on the part of the Utopians.

However, later criticism of *Utopia* has pointed out other less ideal characteristics of the land. For instance, Adams remarks that "More is rather less than generous to women" (38); they not only have full-time jobs in Utopia, but also continue to be responsible for all of the cooking, cleaning and child care that English mothers in More's time would have

done. Comments Adams, “if it doesn’t constitute ‘work’, that word must have a very special meaning” (38). Further feminist critique would also note the patriarchal nature of the Utopia, in which “wives are subject to their husbands” (41).

The high level of state control, such as the requirement of a letter from the prince in order to travel outside of one’s district (45), and the fact that residents are required to switch homes every ten years in order to avoid pride (34) also seem less than ideal when one considers them from a 2007 perspective, when freedom is treasured.

Lost Horizon

Hilton’s Shangri-La in *Lost Horizon* (1962) is not isolated by water as Utopia is, but its verdant valley and mountaintop lamasery are just as effectively isolated by mountains. Plank (1964) explains that the placement of utopias changed over time, shifting from predominantly islands to other isolated terrains, such as Shangri-La’s valley, because the oceans became too well-explored to believably conceal societies. “The contrast between the peaceful level floor of the valley, with its smiling landscape and luxuriant vegetation, and the bare and forbidding mountains surrounding it has an even greater power to stimulate a certain mood,” he says (45). Therefore, in losing islands as a convincing location, utopian authors did not necessarily lose effectiveness.

The story opens in 1932 with the four central characters in the story, Hugh Conway, Charles Mallinson, Henry Barnard and Miss Roberta Brinklow, fleeing from a less than Edenic environment – they are leaving Baskul, India, on a plane, because the revolutionaries in the city are taking foreigners hostage. However, their plane is high-jacked and crashes in the Himalayan mountains. Were it not for a group of monks that meets them on the chilly terrain and leads them to the oasis lamasery of Shangri-La, they would not have survived. Here, they are offered great hospitality in a luxurious setting with modern conveniences such as heat and warm baths, a library stocked with books (including Thomas More and, presumably, *Utopia*, a deft bit of foreshadowing) and nearly everything else one could want. The reader even later learns that Shangri-La residents have prolonged lives; Father Perrault, with whom Conway kindles a friendship, is 251 years old.

When the quartet of foreigners first arrive near Shangri-La, Conway, an experienced mountaineer, estimates that they had been marooned in the lesser known heights of the Kuen-Lun, a mountain range on the

northern edge of the Tibetan plateau. He muses: "In that event they would by now have reached the loftiest and least hospitable part of the Earth's surface, the Tibetan plateau, two miles high even in its lowest valleys, a vast, uninhabited, and largely unexplored region of the wind-swept upland" (Hilton 1962, 49). In fact, Conway compares their predicament to that of someone marooned on a desert island, concluding they were "in far less comfort than on most desert islands" (49). This craggy wilderness of ice, snow and wind does not appear to be a landscape that could harbour a utopia. Nevertheless, the geography of Shangri-La appears to be just that.

The first geographical feature that should be considered is Karakal, the mountain that entrances Conway from his first glimpse of it. He describes it as: "the loveliest mountain on Earth. It was an almost perfect cone of snow, simple in outline as if a child had drawn it... It was so radiant, so serenely poised, that he wondered for a moment if it were real at all" (47). Karakal, which dominates the view from Shangri-La, is presented in a way fitting to the Tibetan belief in harmony and balance. It reminds one of the revered, relatively symmetrical Mount Fuji, or the pyramids of Egypt. According to the group's guide, Chang, it is more than 28,000 feet high. This measurement places it only 1,000 feet below the height of Mount Everest, 29,035 feet (Encarta). Finally, the word Karakal, in the dialect of the people who live in the Shangri-La valley, means "Blue Moon" (75). This translation has a direct link with the idea of utopia. "Utopia" is a combination of the Greek *ou* and *topos*, meaning "no place" (More 3). Therefore, just as a blue moon is viewed as a very rare event, so too is utopia unlikely, if impossible, to find.

The natural fortifications and protection of Shangri-La are also wonders of geography. The aforementioned surrounding terrain of inhospitable Tibetan plateau and mountains provide the first and most obvious barrier to intrusion from the outside world. Second, the single, hidden and dangerous route to Shangri-La means that it is difficult to find the lamasery without knowing its exact location. Guided by the lamas who lead him to the lamasery after the plane crashed, Conway trudges up and down steep slopes and along narrow paths bordered by deep abysses and remarks "It's quite certain we could never have found our way here by ourselves" (59). This concealment, the reader later discovers, is a geographical factor which pleases the lamas very much. In a discussion concerning the future of Shangri-La, Father Perrault tells Conway "there was no need to fear invasion by an army. That will never be possible, owing to the nature and distances of the country" (131). In fact, Perrault reveals that the lamasery hopes to weather the destruction of the world from its secluded location. Having dreamed of a future where men, "exultant in a technique of homicide, would rage so hotly over the world that every precious thing would be in

danger,” he hopes that geographic isolation will enable Shangri-La to be sheltered. “The airman bearing loads of death to the great cities will not pass our way,” he says (181).

Another geographical feature is the valley that supports the lamasery built on a cliff. When Conway visits the valley, he describes it as “nothing less than an enclosed paradise of amazing fertility, in which the vertical difference of a few hundred feet spanned the whole gulf between temperate and tropical” (97). In the middle of the uninviting mountains, “crops of unusual diversity,” such as mangoes, are grown on the lush valley floor. Conway notes that the crops are fed by streams and rivulets flowing from glaciers and marvels at the natural and perfect geographic design. “But for some chance-placed barrier, the whole valley would clearly have been a lake...the whole design was almost uncannily fortunate,” he says. It is interesting to note that the agriculture appears to be quite unsustainable. “There was not an inch of ground untended. The whole cultivated area stretched for perhaps a dozen miles,...and, though narrow, it had the luck to take sunlight at the hottest part of the day,” describes Conway (97). Yet, in spite of this intense cultivation, the valley has apparently supported inhabitants since before Father Perrault arrived in 1719. Therefore, the valley appears to be a prolific garden of Eden, with perfect soil, sunlight, climate and water supply, that will not be exhausted. A final note should be made that gold is found in the valley in large amounts. However, like More’s inhabitants, the residents do not clamour to stockpile the wealth. Instead, they use it to order from outside simply that which they need.

Shangri-La may be edenic for those born in the valley; most of them, known as the people of the Blue Moon, are aware of nowhere else. Father Perrault explains: “... they know nothing of such countries as France or England or even India – they imagine the dread altiplano stretching, as it almost does, illimitably. To them, so snug at their warm and windless levels, it appears unthinkable that any one inside the valley should ever wish to leave it; indeed, they picture all unfortunate ‘outsiders’ as passionately desiring to enter” (178). This unawareness is a bit disconcerting, for the lamas of Shangri-La could easily share their knowledge of the world with the valley inhabitants. However, since the inhabitants appear to be genuinely happy, it is hard to seriously criticize this arrangement.

More disturbing is that newcomers who do not like Shangri-La are not permitted to leave. The lamas fear that if they permit people to leave, Shangri-La could be faced with an influx of people seeking prolonged youth or, perhaps even more likely, the large amounts of gold in the valley. The character of Mallinson most strongly demonstrates this dystopian undertone. Rather than finding the geographic seclusion relaxing and

secure, he finds it far too isolated. As noted by Ruppert (1986), “One person’s utopian dream turns out to be another’s nightmare” (98). When he first arrives, Mallinson refers to Shangri-La as a “hell’s kitchen” (Hilton 1962, 60). His uneasiness about the place grows throughout the novel; he implies that Shangri-La is not part of civilization (55, 71), refers to their situation as “nightmarish” (61), calls it a “prison” and compares himself to “a monkey in a cage” (166). Mallinson feels that the uncertain, war-torn world he left behind is preferable to Shangri-La. “A lot of wizened old men crouching here like spiders for any one who comes near...it’s filthy,” he says (192).

Of the four people who arrived on the airplane, Mallinson is the only one who does not wish to stay. Barnard is happy about the isolation because he is wanted for embezzlement throughout the world, Mrs. Brinklow is determined to convert the natives and Conway enjoys the harmony and peacefulness after being broken in World War One. However, Barnard and Brinklow do not yet realize that their hiatus from the “real world” is life-long.

It is clear that Shangri-La has had many unwilling residents. Father Perrault is pleased with Conway’s calm acceptance of the rule, saying: “My revelation has been greeted in almost every conceivable manner – with indignation, distress, fury, disbelief, and hysteria – but never until this night with mere interest” (139). He also admits that not all people gain from living at Shangri-La, saying of Mallinson’s unhappiness: “we do not and cannot guarantee success; some of our visitors derive no benefit at all from their stay here...” (137). He accepts that some people will find Shangri-La unpleasant. It seems rather callous for Perrault to simply dismiss such residents. According to Chang, some residents take twenty years to be “reconciled” to the situation – a rather long time, whether one’s life is unnaturally extended or not. Again, the reason people such as Mallinson are forced to stay is that the lamas fear someone who was permitted to leave could cause problems for the lamasery. Their concerns may be well-founded; Mallinson tells Conway, “My God, I’d give a good deal to fly over with a load of bombs!” (192). Nevertheless, a society that has even one inhabitant who is so unhappy is not a true utopia.

Shangri-La is not alone in having unhappy residents. Yet some utopias are specifically built on the premise that one must suffer for all. *The Giver* (Lowry 1992), the next book to be discussed, is an example of a society in which one person suffers in order for the rest to be content.

The Giver

Shangri-La relied on the natural fortifications of mountains to protect its secrets. However, there is nothing natural about the geography in *The Giver* (Lowry 1992). It is a novel in which humans have deliberately altered the landscape in order to create what they perceive as utopia. When he is twelve years old the protagonist, Jonas, is selected to be trained as the community's Receiver – the person who holds generations of memories so that no other citizen will have to feel pain, sorrow or fear. Without memories, history or feelings, the lives of people in the community are as uneventful as possible; their careers are chosen for them, they take medications to repress sexual urges and they do not know what love is.

The man-made geography of *The Giver* has no distinctive geographic features at all. Hills and mountains have been levelled. In addition, climate is controlled so that there is no rain, snow, sunshine or weather whatsoever. The protagonist, Jonas, lives in a community where only he, the Receiver of memory in training, and the Giver have concepts of geography and climate. Geography as we know it exists only in the memories held by these two people. All other residents are ignorant to the fact that landscape, weather and colour can vary. In fact, when Jonas begins his training, he does not know the meanings of the words "hill," "snow"(81) and "sunshine" (85). Only when the Giver provides him with memories of geography and weather does Jonas begin to recognize the vast topographies and climates possible. For instance, a memory he is given of sliding down a hill on a sled introduces him to the concepts of snow and hills. When he first sees a hill in memory transferred to him by the Giver, it is described as "a long, extended mound that rose from the very land where he was" (81).

This human control over landscape, explains the Giver, is called "Sameness," a manipulation which, in the view of its creators generations ago, created an ideal, comfortable life. The Giver explains:

"Snow made growing food difficult, limiting the agricultural periods. And unpredictable weather made transportation almost impossible at times. It wasn't a practical thing, so it became obsolete when we went to Sameness...And hills, too. They made conveyance of goods unwieldy. Trucks; busses. Slowed them down" (84).

In addition, this "Sameness" led to a loss of colour. "We relinquished colour when we relinquished sunshine and did away with differences," explains the Giver. "We gained control of many things. But we had to let

go of others" (95). Therefore, Jonas's community has no weather, no hills and no colour. There is as little distinction as possible in the landscape. Ironically, people rarely leave the community, so the sameness of geography does not appear to be particularly useful. People can only leave the community "on official business," to go to another community with the similar sets of boundaries or on occasions when children from one community visit those in another, who are part of the same utopia anyway. Nevertheless, the geography of the communities reminds the reader not of a stereotypical edenic utopia, but of the prairies, now with colourless fields replacing golden stretches of wheat and with a bland sky replacing a blazing blue one. Jonas lives in this dull, lifeless landscape with no vibrancy or variation. He describes: "...the land beyond the bridge was much the same, flat and well ordered, with fields for agriculture. The other communities he had seen on visits were essentially the same as his own, the only differences were slightly altered styles of dwellings, slightly different schedules at school" (106). Sameness is equated with security; variety would introduce a risk of emotion and yearning that cannot be tolerated if a human is to be untroubled. Hence, even geography must remain bland. Jonas pays the price of this utopia by holding horrific memories; utopia for him becomes hell.

Only when at the end of the book Jonas flees the community, both to force the community to share the burden of memories and to save the life of an infant deemed "inadequate" and, therefore, slated to be killed, does he experience varied geography for himself. Forests grow on either side of the now untended road and he sees wildlife such as birds and deer (Jonas had been raised to believe they were mythical creatures). For the first time, he encounters streams and waterfalls. This natural landscape illustrates what a starved life he has led geographically and also indicates one element of the dystopia; readers may ask themselves "would I be willing to give up geography, weather and variety, even if it made my life safer and more secure?" Jonas reflects: "During his twelve years in the community, he had never felt such simple moments of exquisite happiness" (172). However, Jonas also discovers the natural hazards of climate, as he is numbed and weakened by a blizzard and appears to die (175)¹. It is common for utopias to have ideal climates; once Jonas left his home, he was no longer under utopian protection. "The climate of a utopia generally seems to be either an equable given or something totally under man's control. Extreme environmental events are done away with; nature catastrophes do not occur," write Lukermann and Porter (1976, 210). While Lowry presents the human control of climate and geography as bland, she does not ignore the risks of natural hazards outside of utopia.

The pain that Jonas and The Giver must endure in order for the rest of the community to remain comfortably naïve is the strongest dystopian element in Lowry's book. When Jonas asks the Giver why the entire community does not share the memories, he is told "...then everyone would be burdened and pained. They don't want that. And that's the real reason The Receiver is so vital to them, and so honoured. They selected me – and you – to lift that burden from themselves" (113). The Giver explains to Jonas that the memories consume the life of the Receiver – "...here in this room, all alone, I re-experience them again and again... I am so *weighted* with them," he says (78). He cannot leave this tortured life. He cannot leave the community; it is not permitted. Travel outside of the community is closely monitored and so nobody can easily leave (although most people are so well-programmed and conditioned that it would not occur to them to leave); when Jonas escapes, he is pursued by heat-seeking planes. The Receiver cannot even ask to be "released," a form of euthanasia permitted to all other residents – although most residents do not know that "release" means death. To them, it simply means going "elsewhere." The ethics of "release," which is also a punishment for rule-breakers, is yet another dystopian characteristic.

The sacrifice of The Giver – one within a community of hundreds – is similar to the suffering of the naked, confused, underfed and unloved child in Ursula Le Guin's short story, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (Pojman 2000). This child's misery allows the utopia of Omelas to exist. The citizens of Omelas know of the child, and some people visit its locked, unlit room once in their lives in order to understand how their happiness is sustained. However, while the citizens in Jonas's village are unaware that The Receiver suffers for them, the residents of Omelas are very aware, and feel very guilty, that this child is responsible for their wealth. Writes Le Guin: "They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do. If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place...all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms. To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single, small improvement: to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of happiness of one..." (267).

The Chrysalids

Unlike the society in *The Giver*, which willfully altered its landscape, Wyndham's dystopian world is a result of humans unwittingly changing

geography with nuclear weaponry. It is a novel born out of Cold War fear. Set in a future where nuclear weapons have rendered landscapes nearly unrecognizable and wiped out nearly all records of human history except for the Bible, it presents readers with a fundamentalist people living in Waknuk, Labrador, who are insistent on re-creating the "Golden Age" that once existed. Ignorant of the nuclear disaster, they believe the humans were punished by God through "Tribulation," much like the expulsion from Eden and the Flood were punishments. Waknuk inhabitants shun anyone who does not reflect what is believed to be God's image: one body, one head, two arms, two legs, hands on the end of each arm and five fingers on each hand. Anyone "different" is labelled "deviant" and called an "abomination." However, David, the protagonist, as well as his cousin Rosalind and numerous other Waknuk children are invisibly deviant; they practice telepathy. Their ability makes their lives difficult and dangerous. It requires them to be always on guard to not reveal that they are different. David describes their frustration: "We had a gift, a sense which...should have been a blessing, but was little better than a curse. The stupidest norm was happier; he could feel that he belonged. We did not, and because we did not, we had no positive – we were condemned to negatives, to not revealing ourselves, to not speaking when we would, to not using what we knew, to not be found out – to a life of perpetual deception, concealment, and lying" (86).

When they are discovered, they must flee to the Fringe country, a land with high radiation to which all other deviants are sent. As they are on the run, David's sister, Petra, who has extraordinarily strong telepathic powers, is in touch with a woman from Sealand (New Zealand), who says she is coming to rescue them and take them to her home, where everyone is telepathic.

The isolated Labrador has been spared total destruction and now its residents seek to rebuild what they think of as utopia based on their understanding of the "Old People." It is a bizarre path they travel for they wish to recreate the situation which has already once all but annihilated the planet. In a country that is really hellish, they seek to go back to old technologies rather than use what they have for a new world.

Labrador can be broken down into four general geographic regions. First, David lives a community called Waknuk, in which radiation is relatively low and deviations can be controlled by destroying "offences," such as two-headed cattle. The agrarian community has about one hundred scattered holdings, surrounded by fields and pasture lands. The other three regions spread out from Waknuk. Thirty miles to the south or southwest of Waknuk lies the Wild Country, where there is a less than fifty per cent chance that breeding will be "true" (20). This area is frontier country;

a region which is widening as radiation decreases, thereby slowly allowing for settlement. Third, there are the Fringes, some fifty miles from Waknuk, where nothing breeds true. It is to the Fringes that “abominations,” people who do not appear to be in “God’s image,” are banished. From a human geography standpoint, a considerable percentage of the Waknuk population moves to the Fringes in an ongoing forced migration, a “permanent movement compelled usually by cultural factors” (Rubenstein 2005, 518). For instance, David’s own uncle was sent to the Fringes. When David and Petra are discovered as mutants, they, too, must flee to the Fringes.

Within the Fringes, no classification of vegetation can be made, as David learns when puzzling over the plant life.

“There were familiar trunks supporting the wrong shape of tree: familiar types of branches growing out of the wrong type of bark, and bearing the wrong kind of leaves...In another place a stretch of ground looked like a dried-out river-bed full of large boulders, but the boulders turned out to be globular fungi,” he observes (152).

A fringes resident explains to David that anything can be expected from the vegetation. “None of it’s like any other part. That’s why the Fringes is the Fringes; pretty near nothing grows true to stock here,” he explains (152). Today, the dominant biome in Labrador is taiga coniferous forest and the three ecozones present are the taiga shield, the boreal plains and the arctic cordillera (Draper 2002, 60-61). However, with such uncertain vegetation in the Fringes, classification does not appear to be possible.

The fourth geographic region is the Badlands, which begins in parts of Labrador and extends far beyond. It is a land where radiation is so high that mutations are grotesque or cannot survive at all. There are several characters who provide information on these lands. First, David’s Uncle Axel describes accounts he has heard from sailors of the worst of the badlands, also called the wastelands:

“The whole seaboard is empty – black and harsh and empty. The land behind them looks like a huge desert of charcoal. Where there are cliffs they are sharp-edged, with nothing to soften them....And yet it can’t always have been like that because there was one ship whose captain was foolhardy enough to sail close inshore. Her crew were able to make out great stone ruins. They were all agreed that they were far too regular

to be natural, and they thought they might be the remains of one of the Old People's cities"(60).

It is here important to note that, in this post-nuclear world, explorers appear to be geographers. Other people are fearful of travelling outside of "safe" territory; rumours and propaganda about geography and dangerous inhabitants in the Fringes and badlands abound, effectively keeping norms in their little enclaves – isolated, as in the majority of utopian or dystopian societies. Still, Uncle Axel also learned about badlands through the journals of a sailor called Marther who described the coastline on one of his voyages:

"The Black Coasts would appear to be an extreme form of Badlands. Since any close approach to them is likely to be fatal nothing can be said of them with certainty but that they are entirely barren, and in some regions are known to glow dimly on a dark night" (61).

The second witness to the Labrador badlands is the telepathic Sealand woman, who flies over them en route to rescue David, Petra and Rosalind. She expresses dismay at the devastated landscape.

"There are stretches, miles across, where it looks as if all the ground has been fused into black glass; there is nothing else, nothing but the glass like a frozen ocean of ink...it's like going over the rim of the world and into the outskirts of hell...The mountains are cinders and the plains are black glass – still, after centuries!" she laments (179).

It is apparent from her description that the heat from nuclear blasts has turned the landscape into metamorphic rock, as well has altered the topography of the land by reducing the size of mountains and hills. From her description, it appears that human impact on the environment in some places may be irreversible.

The woman's home, Sealand, has escaped the brunt of nuclear destruction. Sealand can quite easily be identified as New Zealand. Aside from the obvious similarity in name, it is described as two secluded islands, a geography which matches New Zealand's. Second, it is in the eastern hemisphere; David is confused when the woman projects an image of the city in the daytime when in is nighttime in Labrador. Since geography is in its dark ages in Labrador and the humans living there are not even sure if

the earth is round or flat, David has no sense of hemispheres. However, to the reader, the identification is obvious.

Sealand offers a second utopia in *The Chrysalids* that contrasts with the rigid utopia that the Labrador people are striving for. While the Labrador “utopia under construction” is rural, the Sealand one is urban. Its description is not so unlike that of a well-planned city today:

“A brighter sun than Waknuk ever knew poured down upon the wide blue bay where the lines of white-topped breakers crawled slowly to the beach. Small boats, some with coloured sails, and some with none, were making for the harbour already dotted with craft. Clustered along the shore, and thinning as it stretched back towards the hills, lay a city with its white houses embedded among green parks and gardens. I could even make out the tiny vehicles sliding along the wide, tree-bordered avenues. A little inland, a bright light was blinking from a tower and a fish-shaped machine was floating to the ground” (199).

Interestingly, this city does not vary greatly from cities in the 20th century. There are boats and automobiles, a lighthouse to guide in aircraft and sprawling residential areas. Still, the city has qualities which are idyllic and not necessarily found in abundance in all of today’s cities. White houses symbolize cleanliness and purity. Moreover, the parks and gardens indicate that the urban landscape is carefully designed to have both residential and recreational spaces, not unlike More’s garden-state. It is possible that Wyndham, who is trying to make a political point about nuclear weapons with his book, is content with the urban geography of the mid-1900s. His warning, then, is that a nuclear disaster could cause us to “devolve” into a more agricultural, puritanical and less secure society such as his post-nuclear Waknuk, Labrador. Like Labrador, New Zealand is isolated and was, therefore, spared total destruction. However, it is taking better advantage of its isolation. Instead of resisting the genetic changes brought about by radiation, Sealanders hope that thinking together through telepathy can enable them to create a better world.

There are still several unsettling aspects about their society. First, when the Sealanders come to rescue David, Rosalind and Petra, they use a lethal weapon that is disturbingly deadly and effective. This weapon consists of wispy white strands that the Sealanders release from their airship. The strands wrap and entangle those on the ground, eventually suffocating them. David comments: “There was an unnerving quality about it – something quite different from the fatal issue of a man-to-man fight...” (195). The distance between those who deploy the weapons and those

who are affected by it could perhaps be compared to the deployment of nuclear weaponry. Both are detached ways to dispatch an enemy. Neither requires the deployer to look the victim in the face.

Also disquieting is how easily the Sealand woman dismisses the deaths. Throughout their contact with her, David and Rosalind feel that she is “condescending” (158). When she arrives, the reason for her cold, indifferent nature towards those who are not telepathic becomes evident; she views them as another species. She says: “...ours is the superior variant, and we are only just beginning. We are able to think-together and understand one another as they never could...” (196). In a way, the “inferiority” of most people in Labrador and their unwillingness to accept evolution justifies their deaths in her mind. She has a similar rationalization for the deaths of the Fringes people caught in the weapon: “the unhappy Fringes people were condemned through no act of their own to a life of squalor and misery – there could be no future for them.” Interestingly, the Sealanders do not consider rescuing non-telepathic people and bringing them to Sealand; all other “species” of human are left to suffer. Therefore, just as Waknuk residents only accept one form of human, so too are Sealanders elitist and more accepting of one form than of others. Of the three communities described in the book – the fundamentalist Waknuk, the Fringes settlement and the Sealand city, the last will appeal most to readers. However, Wyndham allows us to glimpse enough imperfection in the society that an astute reader will question whether even it is utopia fulfilled.

Conclusion

Whether a utopia is static or kinetic, boundaries are important to its existence. The four main works discussed in this paper illustrate that fact. Boundaries help residents have the choice of which, if any, changes from the outside they will adopt. Even with protective boundaries, some societies discussed in this paper quite readily accepted certain changes, such as useful technology from other societies. These are examples of the kinetic possibilities in utopia – a further “improving” of an already utopian existence. Few literary utopias exist that are not protected from unwanted contamination by barriers. Suggest Lukermann and Porter (1976): “Whether a utopia is fictional or realized, it requires conditions of stability, not an environment of change, in order to flourish. Literary utopias ensure this through isolation” (201). However, Lukermann and Porter could have recognized that kinetic utopias also exist. In addition, not all change in

utopias is undertaken willingly by all residents; sometimes, dystopian elements that are evident to the reader are solved in some way, such as when Jonas leaves his community in *The Giver*. After he leaves, the community is changed back to a feeling and, therefore, hurting community. Jonas has broken through the geographic barrier and ended their utopia. However, he can improve his own life and stop living in pain.

Utopian literature has changed over time; the idea of the kinetic was consciously introduced by Wells in 1905 and dystopian themes became increasingly common in the 20th century; while More's *Utopia* only faintly suggests some citizens might be unhappy, the other three works considered in this paper have characters that very obviously find their circumstances hellish. Control is present in all of the books discussed in this essay – that by a lamasery in *Lost Horizon*, by tradition and elders in *The Giver* and by fundamentalists in *The Chrysalids*. Key questions raised in all of these books include: “how much freedom should be relinquished in order to attain utopia?” and “can a utopia even exist without freedom of choice?” Geography is linked to these subdued freedoms because the isolation provided by geography helps enable this control.

In addition, the frontiers of literary utopias have shifted over time to accommodate a world that was becoming increasingly mapped and understood. Explain Lukerman and Porter (1976), “As European empires expanded in scope and power, the utopias did too; and since utopists were running out of places to put their imaginary worlds, they had to go underground or resort to outer space or future times” (207). *The Giver* and *The Chrysalids* are examples of books in which writers chose settings in the future. Despite the expanding reach of the human race, isolation in utopian societies (which are often also dystopian, depending on perspective) has proven persistent over time; this telling trend holds true with the four works under study in this essay. As the oceans of More's *Utopia* were charted, writers shifted their Edens to other isolated locations, such as Hilton's Shangri-La or to the future, as Wyndham and Lowry have done, thus demonstrating that geographic isolation may be as important to societies striving for utopia as any social, economic or political factors. Eden can never be found for, unlike the apple of knowledge, it is forever just outside our grasp.

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(Footnotes)

¹ In Lowry

's sequel,

Messenger

(2004), we learn that Jonas survived and joined a much different community in which he is happier.