

POLI 391: Utopia/Dystopia

MWF 11-11:50

Maybank 307

Claire P. Curtis

Office: 114 Wentworth (Political Science bldg., across from Glenn McConnell dorm), #206

Office Hours: MW 1-3:00 or by appointment

[curtisc@cofc.edu](mailto:curtisc@cofc.edu)

The study of utopia (a genre that includes dystopia) is a staple of political thought. Imagining how we might structure our lives in radically better ways has yielded imagined systems of living together as varied as Plato's *Republic*, Thomas More's *Utopia*, and Ursula le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. In the study of politics utopian and dystopian spaces provide both experimental spaces for imagining how people live together and fodder for thinking about how we live now and how we might live differently.

In this class we will read six (mostly) contemporary utopian novels (and one of the things we will discuss is the idea of utopia embedded within seemingly dystopian texts). Interspersed with these readings will be selections from classical utopian texts and experiments in living intentionally. The success of this class is dependent on everyone's close reading and thoughtful participation. We will likely disagree, which is expected! These novels were chosen because of the varieties of issues that they address, which goes from genetic engineering, to the role of education to 3D printing and shared work. Underneath the relevant particular issues, each author is interested to consider how humans live together and what tears us apart.

### Required Texts:

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland*

Ursula Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*

Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*

Cory Doctorow, *Walkaway*

Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

Kim Stanley Robinson, *Pacific Edge*

Lyman Tower Sargeant and Gregory Claeys, *Utopia Reader* (second edition)

Adrienne Maree Brown and Walidah Imarisha, *Octavia's Brood*

### Course Requirements:

Five 3-5 page papers (due dates in syllabus) 10% each	50%
Two Midterm exams 10% each	20%
Class participation	15%
Final project	15%

### Course scale:

A (93-100)	A- (90-92)	B+ (87-89)	B (84-86)	B- (80-83)	C+ (77-79)
C (74-76)	C- (70-73)	D+ (67-69)	D (64-66)	D- (60-63)	F (0-59)

**Accommodations:** Any students who have special learning needs or concerns are urged to speak with me during the first week of the semester if accommodations are needed. The Center for Disability Services provides a comprehensive list of accessibility resources available at the College on the following website: <http://disabilityservices.cofc.edu/>

### **Schedule of Readings:**

- 8/23: Introduction  
8/25: Ursula Le Guin, *The Ones Who Walked away from Omelas*, (OAKS)
- 8/28: Isaiah Berlin, “The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West” (OAKS)  
8/30: *Utopia Reader*, Introduction, pp. 1-15 and Tananarive Due, “The only lasting truth” in *Octavia’s Brood*, pp. 259-277  
9/1: Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, chs. 1-3
- 9/4: *Parable of the Sower*, chs. 4-9  
9/6: *Parable of the Sower*, chs. 10-13  
9/8: *Parable of the Sower*, chs. 14-20
- 9/11: *Parable of the Sower*, chs. 21-25 (Paper due, OAKS, 11pm)  
9/13: Monasticism and The Cockaigne in *Utopian Reader*, pp. 83-92  
9/15: More and Montaigne in *Utopian Reader*, pp. 93-118
- 9/18: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland*, chs. 1-6  
9/20: *Herland*, chs. 7-12 (Paper due, OAKS, 11pm)  
9/22: Edward Bellamy, excerpts from *Looking Backward* in *Utopia Reader*, pp. 282-320
- 9/25: Margaret Atwood, “Writing Utopia” (OAKS) and *Oryx and Crake*, chs. 1-2  
9/27: *Oryx and Crake*, chs. 3-6  
9/29: *Oryx and Crake*, chs. 7-10
- 10/2: *Oryx and Crake*, chs. 11-13  
10/4: *Oryx and Crake*, chs. 14-15 (Paper due, OAKS, 11pm)  
10/6: **Exam 1**
- 10/9: Evie Shockley, “Separation Anxiety,” in *Utopian Reader*, pp. 509-524  
10/11: Ursula Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, pp 1-90  
10/13: *The Dispossessed*, 91-101
- 10/16: **No Class, Fall break**

- 10/18: *The Dispossessed*, pp. 192-270  
 10/20: *The Dispossessed*, pp. 271-307
- 10/23: *The Dispossessed*, pp. 308-387 (Paper due, OAKS, 11pm)  
 10/25: Ursula Le Guin, "The day before the revolution," in *Utopia Reader*, pp. 483-496  
 10/27: Reading TBD
- 10/30: Communal Societies as Utopia, *Utopia Reader*, pp. 209- 232  
 11/1: Living Intentionally continued  
 11/3: **Exam 2**
- 11/6: Kim Stanley Robinson, *Pacific Edge*, Chs. 1-3  
 11/8: *Pacific Edge*, chs. 4-5  
 11/10: **No Class**
- 11/13: *Pacific Edge*, chs. 6-7  
 11/15: *Pacific Edge*, chs. 8-11 (Paper due, OAKS, 11pm)  
 11/17: Lyman Tower Sargeant "Choosing Utopia" (OAKS)
- 11/20: Cory Doctorow, *Walkaway*, chs. 1-2  
 11/22: **No Class, Thanksgiving Break**  
 11/24: **No Class, Thanksgiving Break**
- 11/27: *Walkaway*, 3  
 11/29: *Walkaway*, 4  
 12/1: *Walkaway*, 5-6 and epilogue (Paper due, OAKS, 11pm)
- 12/4: Reading TBD

**Class participation:** Students are expected to come to class prepared to discuss the daily reading. Discussion questions will be posted on OAKS to help guide the reading. In addition, there will be open discussion threads for students to share ideas about links between what we are reading and happenings in the world. These questions will help guide our discussion in class, and will give a space for more active participation for those of you who are less excited about speaking up in class! Threads particular to the novels we are reading will be closed after we complete that novel.

**Short papers:** for 5 of the 6 novels we will read (you choose which one you do not want to write about) you will write a 3-5 page paper analyzing some aspect of the novel. Paper prompts will be available on OAKS. Each paper must include textual evidence for the argument you are making. Papers will be turned in on OAKS (please do not upload documents saved in pages! Save those documents in pdf format before uploading!). Any failure to cite materials used for

papers in this class is considered plagiarism. **Plagiarism is pretending as if the words and ideas of another are in fact yours. This includes a failure to use quotations, a failure to indicate when you are paraphrasing and the failure to give credit to the author whose ideas you are using. Plagiarism is a violation of the Honor Code and will be treated as such.**

**Exams:** Twice during the semester there will be in class exams. These exams will be short essays asking you to synthesize the texts we have been reading.

**Final projects:** each student will choose one idea that they think can make a radical difference for the better in the world. On OAKS you will submit your idea and the initial pieces of your project. By the end of the semester your project will include the following: an explanation of the idea (e.g. how does the technology work), an explanation for why the idea will produce radical change for the better (why it will work), a discussion of who supports the use of this idea, a connection between the idea and one of the novels we have read and an explanation for how its use could potentially go terribly wrong. More information on this project will be distributed mid semester.