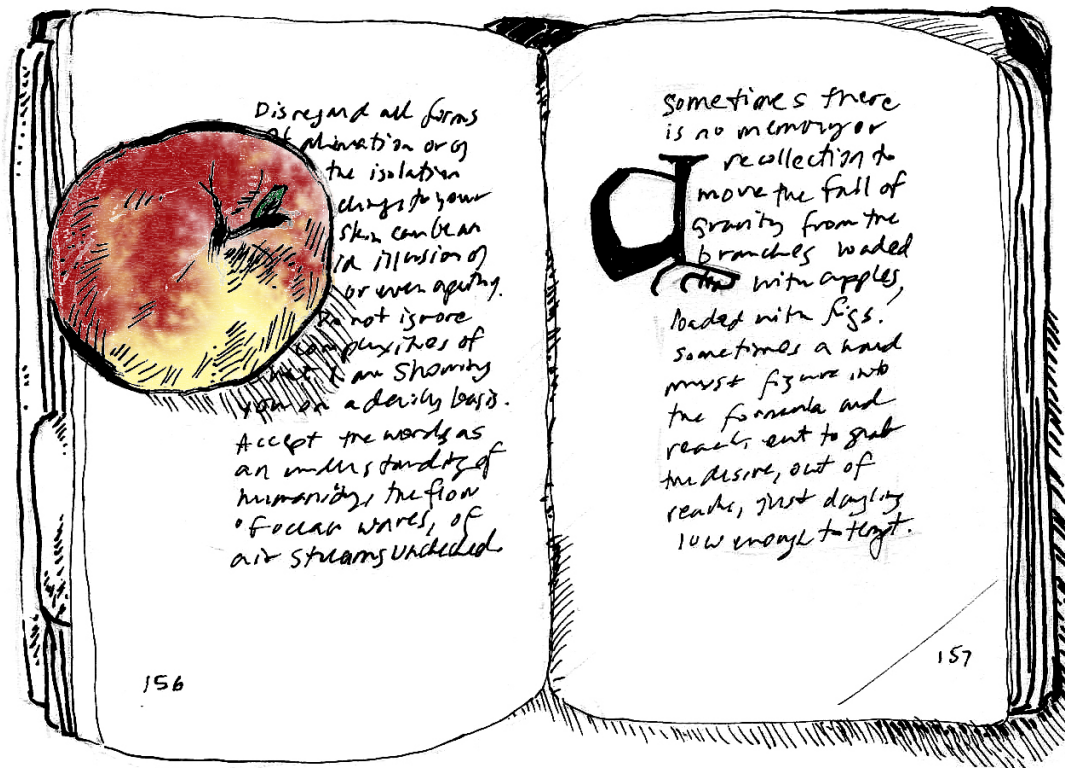


# Sir Thomas More and *Utopia*

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# *Utopia-Book 1*

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**There is much discussion over More's intentions with this publication.**

The focus of many arguments centers on the basic understanding that More's life contradicts the opinions presented in the book.

- the book *Utopia* can be considered a pure fantasy —**or**—  
pure social, political commentary —**or**—
- in many regards it is considered the perfect satire of human society;  
it predates many classic writings with similar intentions:

Jonathon Swift *Gulliver's Travels*

George Orwell *1984*

Aldous Huxley *Brave New World*

Russell Hoban *Riddley Walker*

Ursula K. LeGuin *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*

Ray Bradbury *Fahrenheit 451*

Richard Adams *Watership Down*

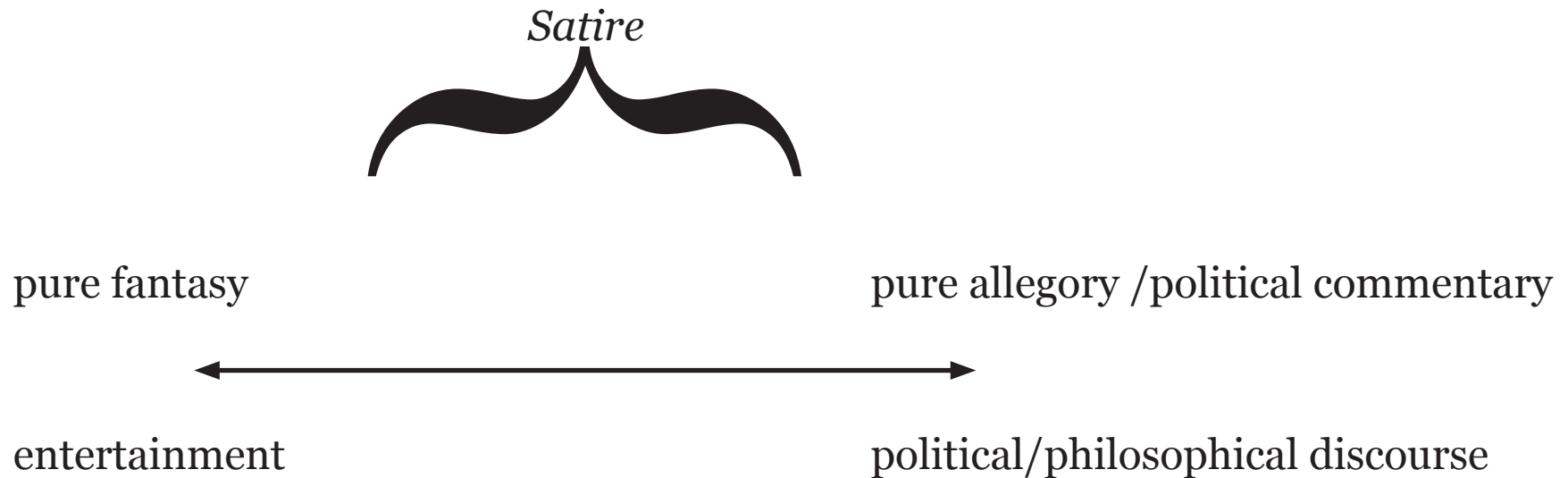
- all in some form question when does a Utopia become a Dystopia?

# *Utopia-Book 1*

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**The argument of More's intention deals mainly with semantics of key words.**

Critics are divided how to label the piece due to the timing of the work in the early Sixteenth Century, and as well, considering More's own political career: Humanist, lawyer, advisor to Henry VIII, Lord Chancellor; also a devout Catholic.



# *Utopia-Book 1*

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**Its construction slightly mirrors Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.**

Similarities can be seen in the strategy of the narrator and the manner both writings raise controversial topics.

- both utilize narrators who are variations, or false copies, of themselves
- both narrators record past discussions from a record of only their memory, after an undisclosed time period; More does relate in non-specific terms that over a year has passed between the initial conversation with the fictional Raphael Hythlodæus and the publication of More's "little book" (716).
- both narrators apologize for their memory and possible flaws, adding layers of irony to the piece
- both utilize a slight blurring of fiction with reality in order to communicate their observations of human nature and human psychology
- both texts are likewise organized on a frame narrative, a story within a story

# *Utopia-Book 1*

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**The text is neatly divided into two sections: Book 1 and Book 2.**

Both sections are shown through first person accounts of events.

## Book 1:

Primarily concerned with  
English social order

the character “More” narrates story  
and establishes political/social themes  
in the full text

establishes England and Europe’s  
social / class problems

## Book2:

Primarily concerned with  
Utopian views of society

the character Raphael Hythlodæus  
narrates his adventures in Utopia,  
discussing their views of society

offers a solution to class struggles  
through example of island Utopia

# *Utopia-Book 1*

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**Originally published in Latin by a Belgium press in 1516.**

It was not printed in English until a few years after the death of Henry VIII .

## **A Quick Time-line**

- 1492: Christopher Columbus lands in New World
- 1516: First publication of *Utopia* in Latin
- 1535: Execution of More for treason, due to his refusal to accept Henry VIII as Head of Church of England
- 1547: Death of Henry VIII
- 1551: First publication of *Utopia* in English

# *Utopia-Book 1*

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**A majority of the figures in the book are based on historic people.**

Of the major actors in the story, only Raphael Hythlodæus is fictional.

- His first name is Hebrew, meaning: *God Heals*
- His last name is based on Greek, translates to: *learned in nonsense*, see footnote 5 in *Longman Anthology*, page 717— examining both first and last together, his full name adds further irony to the whole situation of More's intentions.
- Peter Giles is based on a real, historical individual, a friend of More.
- By exchanging dialogue between these two principle characters and portraying himself as narrator, More subtly plays with various political and social ideas.

# *Utopia-Book 1*

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**The introduction takes the form of a letter, written by More to Giles.**

In this fashion, More prepares the reader for a direct approach on the topic.

- In a tongue-in-cheek approach, he apologizes for the flaws in the full text showing mock humility.
- In this fashion he also establishes a background exposition for the reader, creating an atmosphere of factual recording.
- It is here he also suggests his memory is sound in recollecting the full conversations between the three men: “I do not entirely distrust myself. (I only wish I were as good in intelligence and learning as I am not altogether deficient in memory!)” (717)— further statements of mock humility.
- He further states: “I would rather be honest than wise” (717)— a statement adding yet another layer of irony to the situation.



# *Utopia-Book 1*

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**Further, to help separate fact from fiction, he conveniently recalls that neither Giles nor himself asked Hythlodæus where Utopia is located.**

In this fashion, More establishes an elaborate fictional atmosphere.

- He writes: “We forgot to ask, and he forgot to say, in what part of the new world Utopia lies. I am sorry that part was omitted, and I would be willing to pay a considerable sum to purchase that information, partly because I am rather ashamed to be ignorant in what sea lies the island of which I am saying so much, partly because there are several among us, and one in particular, a devout man and a theologian by profession, burning with an extraordinary desire to visit Utopia” (717).

# *Utopia-Book 1*

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## **The first person narration continues in Book 1.**

For the most part, More will bait his readers strategically, revealing little information at a time to continue interest in the subject.

- Peter Giles, as a factual individual, adds credence to More's fiction. A sense of reality blurs into the fantasy of the commentary. Giles becomes as well a participatory witness of the material reported by Hythlodæus. It is necessary to provide the reader some of Giles credentials enhancing the satire's motives.
- When Hythlodæus is introduced, notice that he is shown first through a romanticized view as an explorer:  
He is "a man of advanced years, with sunburnt countenance and long beard and cloak hanging carelessly from his shoulder, [he seems] to be [...] a ship's captain (720).
- Notice he is shown as Portuguese; he is from a country who is a major player in the development of the colonies in the New World.

# *Utopia-Book 1*

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## **More uses a slight digression topic at this point.**

By establishing why Hythlodæus will not be an advisor to a king, the political and social themes of the story are slowly revealed.

- Subtly More reveals more information about Utopia, section by section.

The pace of the material increases as the reader gets closer to Book 2.

- The conversation also allows a second party (the non-English Hythlodæus) to provide negative comments about the current state of English society and politics.
- On page 724, More begins his rhetoric of social commentary by using a controversial subject (and still relevant topic for today)— what to do with the common thief.
- Rather than execution, Hythlodæus proposes reformation tactics.

# *Utopia-Book 1*

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**Part of Hythlodæus' theories are based on the concept that criminals are victims of situations made by the English class system.**

Taking the standpoint that More theories echo what Hythlodæus proposes, what is established:

- Most thieves are created by a class of men who are veterans of recent wars and who have lost limbs in battle or men who are out of employment due to ill health and cannot perform basic manual labor.
- Executions as “punishing thieves goes beyond justice and is not for the public good. It is too harsh a penalty for theft and yet is not a sufficient deterrent. Theft alone is not a grave offense that ought to be punished with death” (724).
- The upper class who own property and rent out the land to tenant farmers are like drones; these noblemen do not promote society's concerns.

# *Utopia-Book 1*

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**Hythlodæus moves towards his most radical theory at this point.**

He establishes a complaint against the noblemen who are **landed gentry**.

- a social class in Britain who live solely off the products of tenant farmers
- landed gentry is a hereditary title passed from generation to generation; it is believed that with the Norman influence such concepts were created
- to put this in perspective: a **yeoman** is a freeman farmer who own his property and who works the fields himself— not considered a part of the upper class structure; a yeoman is considered in the working class
- above the yeoman is a **gentleman**, an individual who is a part of the hereditary ruling class; independently wealthy and does not work; a gentleman owns multiple properties and hires others to physically maintain the land
- from this introductory concept he develops an extreme concept for the time period— see page 15 of demo.

# *Utopia-Book 1*

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## **Hythlodæus suggests that sheep are a chief problem for the English.**

He claims “Your sheep [...] which are usually so tame and so cheaply fed, begin now, according to report, to be so greedy and wild that they devour human beings themselves and devastate and depopulate fields, houses, and towns” (725-726).

- Through this satiric passage, Hythlodæus makes a strong commentary against the developing wool industry itself (see footnote 9, page 726).
- He further takes the argument to include the full economy of Britain:  
“A single shepherd or herdsman is sufficient for grazing livestock on that land for whose cultivation many hands were once required to make it raise crops” (726).
- A secondary theme of idleness is shown: idle hands are the devil’s workshop.
- Likewise includes statements regarding gambling, brothels, and youth of the day.

# *Utopia-Book 1*

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**Considering More lived in the era of Monarchs, it is surprising how Hythlodæus proposes a solution.**

The character suggests that removal of private property and monies would alleviate English and European conflicts.

- Remember the proposal Hythlodæus suggests emerges from the early Sixteenth Century— a period in history where even a working notion of Democracy has not been achieved.
- It has been suggested that his proposal was the beginnings of Marxist theories, centuries later.
- In *Utopia*, Book 1, Hythlodæus begins his argument: “wherever you have private property and all men measure all things by cash values, there it is scarcely possible for a commonwealth to have justice or prosperity—” (739).
- Review the next two paragraphs in the text.

# *Utopia-Book 1*

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## **Furthermore, More himself contradicts Hythlodæus.**

As a form of rebuttal, Thomas More, the author, uses the narrator-More to argue a different point:

- “How can there be a sufficiently supply of goods when each [citizen] withdraws himself from the labor of production? [...] Moreover, when people are goaded by want and yet the individual cannot legally keep as his own what he has gained, must there not be trouble from continual bloodshed and riot?” (740).
- Hythlodæus responds that although he understands More’s position he himself had lived in Utopia for five years and has seen the system working.
- Ironically (again), the modern definition of Utopia derives from More’s work.
- In English, utopia translates to: *a good place or no place*



# Utopia-Book 1

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**The question then falls, how much of Hythlodæus is in More?**

Or to put it another way: which is more of the satire, the character Hythlodæus or the narrator-More?

**More**

As a Humanist, author-More follows  
Neoplatonic philosophies

>

**Raphael Hythlodæus**

More generates a character who follows  
a strict discipline from Ancient Greece

>

**Plato**

Rejects those against  
legislation which  
provides equal share

- Plato's philosophies and writings are the basis of many Humanist philosophies. These neoplatonic ideas, mixed with Christian principles, are the basis of the Renaissance movement in Europe.