Connections

*Utopia in literature*

A utopia or utopian society is an imagined place or state in which everything is perfect. This report deliberates the connections between four distinctive texts that include aspects of the theme utopia within literature. Through analysing Pleasantville directed by Gary Ross, The Secret Life of Walter Mitty directed by Ben Stiller, Alice in Wonderland written by Lewis Carroll and The Life of Pi directed by Ang Lee, I have observed that a utopia within literature is prominent throughout all texts. I have selected these texts as I believe they clearly demonstrate the prevalence of the idea and existence of a perfect world' or a utopia within literature and share religious or other references. This report addresses the following questions which I felt showed particular connections between the four texts. Initially I answered how a dystopia is seen within literature? Secondly, what biblical/religious or other references create a connection between the texts? And finally I investigated the immortality of the utopia theme within literature.

**How is a dystopia seen within literature?**

The mysterious island in The Life of Pi and the conformist town of Pleasantville both appear to be a faultless place, a utopia. But their faultless appearance masks a dark side that brands it as a dystopia. This façade is a common thread in literature. Initially the mysterious island in The Life of Pi is masked as a utopia, rich with nature and wildlife, complete with picturesque beaches and beautiful sunsets. Originally when Pi and Richard Parker arrive at the island, they sleep in the trees and eat algae and other sweet plants the island makes available. Gradually, Pi reclaims his strength and ability to walk with the assistance of the island and its provision of food and water. Without the island Pi and Richard Parker would have no food, water or shelter, which encourages the audience to perceive the island to be a utopia. However, as nighttime approaches the dystopian nature of the island is truly exposed. The ground becomes deadly, killing and dominating anything on the island. This is shown when Pi is pealing back a layer of what he deems as piece of fruit, which he then discovers a human tooth within. Pi decides he must cast himself and Richard Parker from the dystopian, allegedly Edenic island. Without the safety of the boat during the night the dystopian island would have mostly likely consumed Richard Parker.

Correspondingly Pleasantville is also later seen as a dystopia but is primarily perceived as a utopia. Pleasantville is dystopian in that its society although seemingly free are controlled by conformist rules and expectations set by the Pleasantville town council. The idealistic elements of Pleasantville are instantly obvious due to the innocent and flawlessness of the town, reflected in the costuming and communication between characters. Initially in the film we see the utopian and conformist ideal in Pleasantville amplified when compared to todays society, which is apparent through the everlasting happiness of the town, with the largest of problems being who to take to the school dance or what to eat. The introduction of Jen and David into the Pleasantville society makes obvious the dystopian nature of the town. The changes that occur within the Pleasantville society due to the arrival of Jennifer and David cause it to change into a society that closely resembles today's culture, creating a convincing argument for human nature. The identical nature of the houses in Pleasantville highlights the utopian nature of the town that attempts to construct a perfect world, but in fact the conformist expectations and suppression of individuality causes the society to be deemed a dystopia. Curiosity is a key element within human nature and the suppression of this within Pleasantville makes the village naïve and with no knowledge other than what they are told.

The Life of Pi and Pleasantville are connected through the questioning of a utopian society or a dystopian society. Have you ever considered similarities between a not-so-perfect world and today's society? A perfect world does not exist, as Pleasantville demonstrates. The façade of a utopian society in both films causes the viewer to misjudge both the mysterious island and Pleasantville's society. This is interesting because stereotypes cause a misjudgment of character in both films. The texts become a metaphor for perfection not being a reality and not something desired. The two connecting films indicate perfection (utopia) as an undesired trait within literature. -

**What biblical/religious or other references create a connection between the texts?**

Biblical illusions and references are prominent throughout literature. Both The Life of Pi and Pleasantville have strong biblical references, which create a convincing connection between the two films. Pleasantville can also be seen as a reference to the Garden of Eden due to the innocence and strong idea of perfection within the town. When Jennifer and David are tricked into becoming a part of the 1950's sitcom, the town begins to change. As Jennifer introduces the idea of sex in the film to the people of Pleasantville, ultimately this destroys the innocence and perfection of the town. Pleasantville's director Gary Ross was able to confront major social concerns and maintain the references to religion in the film through colour. Colour in the film was used a symbol for change. When the people in the town of Pleasantville disobey conformist rules and expectations set by the town council and open themselves up to change and new possibilities, they change from black and white (greyscale) into colour. The use of colour creates the strong idea of sin, as many people within the town perceived the change from black and white into colour as an undesirable occurrence. The idea of people changing and being considered "coloured" creates a strong reference to concerns that are embedded in American history and culture. In Pleasantville the discovery of books and sex can be seen as a reference to the bible story of the Garden of Eden. The discovery of books (good) and sex (evil) is another reference to the Tree of Knowledge, where in the story Eve was deceived by a traitor to eat the apple from the tree, which as a consequence brought evil and knowledge to mankind.

Similarly, Pleasantville and The Life of Pi share various religious references. Initially in The Life of Pi the island is portrayed as a biblical Eden, with no indication of torment. For example, there is an instant illusion to the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Knowledge in The Life of Pi when Pi discovers a human tooth within a piece of fruit. Throughout The Life of Pi there continue to be multiple references to Christ. Originally when Pi arrives on the mysterious island and gets of his lifeboat and steps into the water, he quickly realizes that he does not sink past the water and instead walks on the surface due to the support of plants under the waters surface. In this scene we see Pi literally walk on water, making the Christ metaphor very apparent in this scene. Further into this scene Pi connects with the nature living on the island, openly obeying and following God/Allah. There is then a connection to the short verse in the bible “Jesus wept", when Pi utters “I wept". The director, Ang Lee portrays this scene as a resurrection of Pi, indicating to the audience that the island lets him return to life. However this dystopian island proves this reference incorrect, Biblical/religious allusions within the two texts are used to represent events that have happened in history, e.g. the colour change in Pleasantville, creating a connection with concerns within American history and culture. Religious allusions also encourage the utopia theme through the use of Christ.

**Immortality of the Utopian theme**

We live in world of dreams, where the idea of a utopia is ever apparent throughout life. The capacity to build an escape mechanism is ageless which is represented through the two texts; Alice in Wonderland and The Secret Life of Walter Mitty, Alice in Wonderland and The Secret Life of Walter Mitty demonstrate the idea of a utopia being present amongst many ages. Alice in Wonderland both confirms and disobeys the typical utopian Structure, through the use of the basic structure of a utopia, Alice

is a young girl whom falls into a deep dream while her sister is reading to her. The story tells of her adventures before finding herself awake on her sister's lap where she was initially. Similarly, Walter Mitty is an escapist, daydreaming in a world of fantasy filled with action, romance and fearlessness in order to escape his anonymous existence. Although Alice is a young girl and Walter is an older working man, they both share similarities or a connection. Both characters within these two texts share the love of dreaming or escaping reality. However Alice's perception of a perfect world seems enchanted, consisting of white rabbits and other magical individuals. Walters's perception of a perfect world is set in more of a real-world situtaion with this character running into buildings to save lives. Both of the characters perceptions of a perfect world or utopia cause them to escape the real world momentarily, with Alice living in a fairytale, and Walter escaping his anonymous life for heroism. Highlighting that the utopia theme is ageless.

The four texts I chosen to investigate including; The Life of Pi Pleasantville, Alice Wonderland, and The Secret Life of Walter Mitty together question the existence of a ‘perfect world' both within literature and today's society. The overall association of the texts is proven through the idea of a utopia being cast as a façade repetitively throughout literature, later revealing itself to be a true dystopian society. Biblical and historical connections also create a link between the texts and to history e.g. Jesus Christ and American history concerns. Lastly, the immortality of a utopia proves that age is not a relevant factor, as the idea of a perfect world exists throughout life. A utopia or utopian society is an imagined place or state in which everything is perfect. Subconsciously we all have our own utopia or something we perceive to be a 'perfect world', however this report deliberates that both within literature and today's society, the idea of a perfect world is merely an aspiration and a hopeless dream.

*“Utopia is not a destination, just a direction and a dream”-Anonymous*