The “Perfect” World

Often times, when one is pondering the idea of a “perfect” world, the initial action is to look at the aspects that make this world imperfect. If hardships such as hunger, disease, war, and inequality were eliminated from this world, then it would seem closer to a utopia. This idea of looking towards future advancement as the way of achieving a “perfect” world is known as a progressive utopia. However, I believe that this method of thinking is incapable of obtaining the “perfect world”. Even after ridding the world of its struggles and toils and making countless technological advancements to solve problems, society would inevitably experience inequality socially, politically, and economically. It is impossible for our present-day society to obtain such an extreme goal.

Instead of looking forward towards the future, it may be more beneficial to look towards the past. In this sense, a nostalgic utopia is the answer to the problems at hand. A nostalgic utopia desires a return to the past and yearns for a similar life in that way again. I believe that in order to achieve a true utopia, we must look towards the past to a civilization of mankind before The Fall, such as the “The Garden of Eden”. Here, mankind lived in harmony with creation. There was no established society to experience poverty, war, or social injustice. There is a lack of work and toil which allows for mankind to live in true peace and happiness. This idea of a utopia that predates human’s constant worldwide war, complex economies of scale, and engrained social inequalities is the method of thinking that could lead to a “perfect world”. However impossible this may seem, I believe that it is sincerer than that of a progressive utopia.
The concept of a progressive utopia can be found in Chernyshevsky’s “What Is to Be Done?”. In this piece of literature, the characters look to solve current hardships and problems by making technological advancements to better society. On page 371, a passage reads, “The groups working in the fields are almost all signing. What kind of labor are they doing? Oh, they’re gathering the grain. How it quickly it progresses! Why shouldn’t it? Why shouldn’t they be signing? Machines are doing the almost all the work for them—reaping, binding the sheaves, and carting them away. People only have to walk alongside, or ride, or drive the machines. How cleverly they’ve arranged it all for themselves. Although the weather’s very hot, it doesn’t bother them at all. They’ve erected a huge canopy over the part of the field where they’re working. As the work progresses, the canopy gets moved along too. How cool they stay! Why shouldn’t their labor go quickly and cheerfully? Why shouldn’t they be singing?”

In this passage, Chernyshevsky is clearly addressing the labor adversities faced by the laboring class during the late 1800’s. He considers the solution to the turmoil and hard work they experience to be in technological advancements and improvements of the methods they conduct their work. In the second line of the passage, the narrator exclaims, “How quickly it progresses!” The narrator is astonished at how quickly the work is being completed. The workers are progressing through the field at incredible speeds. The fact that work is being accomplished at a faster pace allows for time to be devoted to leisure and enjoyment rather than completing difficult tasks. This concept relates to that of a progressive utopia in the fact that work is undesirable and less work would equate an improved society. The narrator continues, “Machines are doing the almost all the work for them—reaping, binding the sheaves, and carting them away.” If we are able to invent and create machines that do this labor for us, we are able to spend time doing other desired things. This, in turn, leads to a more advanced future that can complete tasks at a faster
rate and create new things to better society. We are even able to see such inventions as described by Chernyshevsky in our present-day society. Those machines that are reaping, binding, and carting the grain are evident in our current agricultural practices. Even though this piece of literature was written over one hundred years ago, the author’s idea of a progressive utopia can be seen in his forward thinking.

Furthermore, as machines accomplish the majority of the work, the laborers are able to enjoy themselves. They are able to “walk alongside, or ride, or drive the machines,” as they sing and stay cool under the canopies they have erected. These inventions not only improve work, but they also lead to an overall improvement of the common good. No longer are these workers in the fields slaving away in the heat completely arduous tasks. Now, their work is enjoyable and all the groups are able to interact and live as a community in happiness. This is one of the most important parts of a utopian society, the integration of society and community in a peaceful and harmonious manner.

This passage clearly illustrates the concept of a utopian society. Its language is exclamatory and exciting. The sheer amount and caliber of advancements seen by the narrator shocks and amazes her. The narrator also asks several rhetorical questions, suggesting that all the advancements that have been made should indeed be put in place. She is adamant about the people being able to sing, use machines, and remain cool. Also, the structure of the passage is constructed as addressing each past hardship and giving its solution, showing how far the society has gone at addressing its problems. The passage is also full of language that depicts a strong image of the work being performed enjoyably. It is very fanciful and illustrates a scene not where work is toilsome, but where groups of people are singing, dancing, and enjoying themselves as they accomplish their work. This passage is an imperative part of the literary work itself and how it
addresses the concept of a utopia and a progressive one at that. It provides concrete examples on how a society can better its position through advancements and looking to the future as the answer.

On the other hand, in Dostoevsky’s “Dream of a Ridiculous Man,” the author addresses a more pastoral and nostalgic utopia. Rather than look towards to future for the solution of present-day problems, the author immerses himself in the past to find an answer. In this passage, a man discovered himself to be transported through space and situated on an earth-like planet. Here, he encountered mankind before The Fall. The narrator states, “It was an earth unstained by the Fall, inhabited by people who had not sinned and who lived in the same paradise as that in which, according to the legends of mankind, our first parents lived before they sinned, with the only difference that all the earth here was everywhere the same paradise.” Already, this work of literature addresses this society as living in a paradise. It is a community without the sin’s mankind has committed engrained in its people.

The author continues, “They desired nothing. They were at peace with themselves. They did not strive to gain knowledge of life as we strive to understand it because their lives were full. But their knowledge was higher and deeper than the knowledge we derive from our science; for our science seeks to explain what life is and strives to understand it in order to teach others how to live, while they know how to live without science.” The society that this man has encountered is not a utopia because of the technological advancements they have made or the problems they have solved. More basically and more importantly, they exist as a utopia because they have come to know the meaning of life. They live in peace and harmony because their lives are not motivated by extrinsic properties such as knowledge, power, or greed. Rather they can simply exist in harmony with nature in a peaceful state by knowing themselves.
Furthermore, the society experienced no pain or cruelty, no jealousy or quarrels, and no grief or tears. The people sang songs and praised nature, the earth, and the sea, and the woods. It may seem as if the society lived in a sort of ignorance, however this ignorance allowed for bliss. These people accomplished a utopia by simply putting the basic idea of life first. The language in this passage contains a tone of astonishment. The narrator is in awe at this society that lives so perfectly by doing so little. The sentence structure is very whimsical, almost as if these people are magical and somewhat unattainable. These passages show how a more true and basic utopia can be achieved by returning to mankind’s roots and looking to the past.

Now, these two types are utopias can be interpreted in the sense of our present-day society. Although a nostalgic utopia produces a utopia most in tune with mankind, it is mainly wishful thinking. The only possible way for our society to achieve such a utopia would be to restart civilization. We would have to rid our past, culture, and ideas of the engrained sins and injustices that plague our world today. Since it is nearly impossible to become like man before the Fall, a more attainable goal would be that of a progressive utopia. Looking forward to a new progressive future, we must look into history and account for the past injustices that have caused us to live in an imperfect world. In this sense, strives would be made in making technological advancements that improve the common good through ridding the world of such things as hunger, disease, and war. No matter which utopian idea is superior, it would be an impressive feat for the human race to accomplish such an immense goal.