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by Margaret Whisnant



taken from

Schooled

By Gordon Korman

A Novel Teaching Pack

by Margaret Whisnant

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e-ISBN 978-1-934538-71-5

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The American Search for Utopia

By Margaret Whisnant

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live in a place where you could make your own rules—a place without arguing or fighting where everybody is happy and good all the time? You are not alone. People have been thinking about such a place for thousands of years. Around 380 BC, Greek philosopher Plato wrote *The Republic*, a dialogue about how mankind might create the perfect community.

Almost two thousand years later in 1516, English lawyer Sir Thomas More wrote a story about a fictional nation located on an island in the Atlantic Ocean. Life there was based on reason and tolerance. The citizens shared work, property, and income. There were no rich people and no poor people. Crime, bad behavior, and conflicts were very rare. Sir Thomas named his fantasy island **Utopia**, a word he coined from the Greek *outopos*, which means “no place.” Some scholars argue that his word is a pun, since there is also a sound-alike Greek word *eutopos*, which means “good place.” By its very name, Utopia is either “no place,” a “good place,” or a “good place located nowhere.” Regardless of Sir Thomas’s intent, the mythical society of perfect peace and harmony now had a name.

Throughout recorded history, visions of the perfect life have filled the hearts and minds of countless people. Many sought religious freedom. Others longed for a new social structure. Typically, the seekers believed their dreams could be realized only by living apart from the rest of the world. The opening of North America in the early 1600s provided a whole continent of pristine, isolated territory where utopian-minded Europeans could start a new life and live according to their beliefs. The guarantee of religious liberty made it irresistible.



The saga begins with the familiar story of the Pilgrims and their flight from religious persecution in England. Their desire for a better life sent them sailing across the treacherous Atlantic for the wilds of a new continent. Within ten years the Puritans followed. Disgusted with English laws that controlled religious beliefs and practices, they crossed the sea to build “a shining city upon a hill,” another Eden that would inspire the rest of the world. Their New England small-town settlements would grow over the next two hundred years into an industrialized world of factories and teeming cities.

The Quakers, or “The Society of Friends,” also had religious disagreements with the English king and his government. They first settled in New England but found that they were not welcome there. Rhode Island proved to be much friendlier. Then in 1682 William Penn established Pennsylvania and set it up to be governed according to Quaker principles. Religious tolerance, the equality of men and women, spirited and spontaneous group discussions, and respect for Native Americans were among their trademarks.

Within a year, a group of 13 German families left their native land in search of religious freedom. They laid out the village of Germantown, Pennsylvania near William Penn's Quaker colony. Other Germans followed and settled nearby. They built monastery-like villages where they lived simply and humbly. They tried out several concepts of communal living, including shared ownership of property and income and group upbringing of children. The Amish, Hutterites, and Mennonites are their descendants.



THE FIRST CHURCH IN PHILADELPHIA.

The first half of the nineteenth century before the outbreak of the Civil War is often referred to as the golden era of Utopian experimentation in the United States. Some took unexpected turns. Members of the Oneida Community, for example, founded Oneida, New York, in 1848. Here, separated from the evils of the world, they intended to live sin-free and perfect. Their population peaked at only 300 members before their commune totally dissolved in 1881. The silverware enterprise they began in 1877, however, grew into Oneida Limited, one of the world's largest designers and distributors of cutlery and tableware.

The Amana Inspirationalists have a similar story. After leaving their Bavarian homes in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria in search of religious freedom, they first settled near Buffalo, New York but moved to Iowa in 1854. Their communal lifestyle was self-sufficient and comfortable. They continued to thrive for almost a hundred years until 1932 when the economic strain of the Great Depression and several other factors forced a change. Members decided to keep their traditional religion but give up communal living. In order to continue their business enterprises, they restructured their community into a joint-stock corporation. Amana Refrigeration, Inc. grew from the original company and is now a leading manufacturer of refrigerators, freezers, electric and gas ranges, home heating and cooling systems, and the familiar Amana microwave oven.

Not all American Utopian dreams have been driven by religious beliefs. Some were social. Welshman Robert Owen thought of himself as the creator of "new moral worlds." He had already turned the Scottish factory town of New Lanark into a model community that offered free housing and education to more than a thousand mill workers when he decided to bring his ideas to America. In 1825 he purchased the ready-made town of New Harmony, Indiana, brought in 900 new residents and his utopian society was off and running. He planned to improve the education, health, working conditions, and well-being of the town's textile workers and their families. These changes, he believed, would result in corrected moral character and better behavior among the population. However, after only three years, disharmony brought his experiment to an end, and Owen returned to England. Still, his vision inspired the building of many mill towns that subsequently sprouted in the Eastern U.S. His theories also influenced many of the current laws and regulations that protect American workers.

Of all the Utopian movements let loose on U.S. soil, the Shakers cut the widest path. More than twenty thousand Americans have lived at least part of their lives in a Shaker community. Generally acknowledged as the most successful utopian movement in

American history, the Shakers have persevered more than two hundred years. Their story began in 1776 when Mother Ann Lee's visions of a new Eden led her and eight followers to leave England and establish the first Shaker colony in Niskayuna, New York.

Their spirited shouting, wild movements, and speaking in tongues during worship earned them their name. Their doctrine included communal living, but men and women were housed separately. Allowed no physical contact, they moved about through different staircases and doors, sat on opposite sides of the room during worship and meals, and socialized only under supervision. Boys attended school during the winter and girls during the summer. Still, Shaker men and women lived together as equals, sharing responsibility and leadership positions.

The Shakers built a simple, self-sufficient existence, growing their own food and constructing or crafting everything they needed. Their music, architecture, crafts, and art have received great acclaim in the outside world. Their beautifully simple but functional furniture continues to be prized, collected, and copied.

At their peak, the Shakers boasted eighteen communities in seven U.S. states. New members came in mostly through conversion, but the group also took in indentured children and they adopted orphans. Their numbers flourished well into the 20th century, but the practice of celibacy has finally taken its toll and all but brought the group to extinction. As of April, 2010, only three believers were left, two women and a man. They reside in Sabbathday Lake, Maine.

The most recent quest for Utopia took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the exhilaration of the hippie counterculture spurred thousands of young people into what amounted to a utopian stampede. Unlike the majority of their ancestors who were filled with religious zeal, the hippies set out to find a place and a social structure where they could live free from the conformity, profit taking, inequality, war, and ecological blunders that they believed were corrupting modern society. No one knows for sure exactly how many hippie utopias were established. There could have been thousands.



The majority quickly disappeared, but many of the ideals that were part of the hippie revolution—going green, for example—have been adopted by main-stream society and become common place.

Like the compelling, new continent that opened up more than four centuries ago, the vastness of space will throw open its doors to mankind before we know it. Millenniums of numerous failed attempts have not interrupted humankind's search for Utopia. No need to guess what happens next.

The American Search for Utopia

By Margaret Whisnant

Refer to the information in *The American Search for Utopia* to answer the following questions. When a **letter** designates the correct answer, write it in the blank to the left of the number. When a short answer is required, use the space provided to enter your response. Write in complete sentences.

- _____ 1. Which of the following *best* states the main idea of the article?
- (A) The utopian groups who settled on American soil were seeking an isolated region where they could practice their religion without persecution.
 - (B) The very first utopian societies were founded in North America.
 - (C) Since the early 1600s, many groups have formed utopian societies on American soil for a variety of reasons.
 - (D) America is one, big Utopia.
- _____ 2. Identify the detail that does **not** support the article's main idea.
- (A) The Pilgrims and the Quakers were two groups who came to America with the intentions of establishing utopian societies.
 - (B) Not all groups who came to American in search of a perfect life were motivated by religious beliefs.
 - (C) The Quakers had great respect for Native Americans.
 - (D) During the 1960s and 1970s, the hippies launched a utopian quest in search of personal freedom and social change. .
- _____ 3. The author's purpose is to
- (A) persuade the reader that searching for Utopia is a good idea.
 - (B) inform the reader about some of the utopian experiments that have taken place in America.
 - (C) entertain the reader with interesting tidbits from American history.
 - (D) convince the reader that utopian experiments are a waste of time.

4. When you look at the first uncaptioned illustration, what name comes to mind when you spot the ship in the distance? Explain why.

5. Why did Sir Thomas More coin the word *Utopia* and where did it come from?

_____ 6. The author wrote that the continent of North America in the 1600s was ***pristine***, *isolated territory*. What is the precise meaning of *pristine* in this phrase?
(A) clean
(B) untouched
(C) fundamental
(D) angelic

_____ 7. Which of the following textual facts explains why the Shakers are generally considered to be the most successful of all the American attempts to create Utopia?
(A) They have survived more than two hundred years and they have attracted as many as twenty thousand members.
(B) Their music, architecture, art, and furniture are popular in the outside world.
(C) They have decreased in numbers since the beginning of the twentieth century but still remain as a group.
(D) They treated men and women as equals long before it was socially acceptable.

_____ 8. What fact(s) prove that Robert Owen's ideas about how to improve the moral character and behavior of the 900 people he gathered for his 1825 utopian experiment didn't work?

9. Put the following events from the text in chronological order by numbering them 1-7, with 1 being the earliest event and 7 being the most recent.

_____ The Amana Inspirationalists disbanded their communal way of life and restructured into a joint-stock corporation.

_____ The Pilgrims left England for America in search of religious freedom.

_____ William Penn founded Pennsylvania and set it up under Quaker rule.

_____ The hippies inspired social revolution that included the founding of a large number of new Utopias.

_____ Mother Ann Lee brought the first group of eight Shakers from England to Nikayuna, New York.

_____ Welshman Robert Owen bought New Harmony, Indiana, and set out to make the town a model community and its 900 new residents model citizens.

_____ A German group of 15 families escaped religious prosecution in their homeland and founded Germantown, Pennsylvania.

- _____ 10. The first half of the nineteenth century is considered the golden era of utopian experimentation in the United States. Which of the following dates is the number designation for this era?
- (A) 1600-1650
 - (B) 1700-1750
 - (C) 1800-1850
 - (D) 1900-1950

Writing Challenge

The author ends by suggesting that space will be the next utopian-building site. When people do finally achieve the technology to colonize space, how will this milestone compare to the opening of North America in the 1600s? How will the two events provide common opportunities for utopia seekers? How will they be totally different?

Do you agree with the author's prediction? Why or why not?

Answer Keys

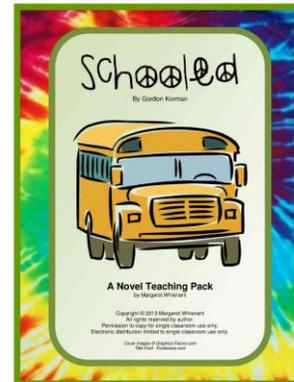
The American Search for Utopia (Free Download)

1. C (CCSS RI 6.2, 7.2, 8.2)
 2. C (CCSS RI. 6.2, 7.2, 8.2)
 3. B (CCSS RI. 6.3, 7.3, 8.3)
 4. The name *Mayflower* comes to mind. The paragraph next to the illustration states that the Pilgrims were the first utopian group to come to America. Their ship, the *Mayflower*, is an important part of their familiar story, so the reader can logically infer that the ship in the picture is the *Mayflower*.
 5. Sir Thomas coined the word because he needed a name for the mythical island he wrote about. He based the name on the Greek word *outopos*, meaning “no place.” Some say the word might be a pun of the sound-alike Greek word *eutopos*, which means “good place.” (CCSS RI 6.3, 7.3, 8.3)
 6. B (CCSS RI. 6.4, 7.4, 8.4)
 7. A (CCSS RI. 6.1, 7.1, 8.1)
 8. The perfect town with a perfect population that he tried to create using his ideas fell into disharmony and dissolved within three years. The fact that Owen went back to England indicates that he had no hope of saving or reviving his project. (CCSS RI. 6.1, 7.1, 8.1.)
 9. 6
1
2
7
4
5
3 (CCSS RI. 6.5, 7.5, 8.5)
 10. C (CCSS RI. 6.4, 7.4, 8.4)
- Writing Challenge: CCSS RI. 6.3, 7.3, 8.3 RI. 6.8, 7.8, 8.8
W. 6.1, 7.1, 8.1 W. 6.2, 7.2, 8.2 W. 6.3, 7.3, 8.3)

Note:

This free, original Informational Text activity is taken from my teaching pack for [Schooled by Gordon Korman](#).

This article is designed to provide students with background information that will heighten their understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment the Mr. Korman’s story and its characters. However, it can also stand alone as a independent, short reading assignment with social studies and CCSS connections.



The complete [Schooled Informational Text Pack](#) has four different articles with CCSS aligned questions and writing activities:

Gordon Korman, Author
The American Search for Utopia
The Hippies
Life on a 60s Rural Commune

Thanks for downloading my freebie!