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Satire and Ambiguity in Thomas More's *Utopia*

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Abstract: Since its publication in 1516, Thomas More's *Utopia* caused confusion amongst literary critics and scientists. This essay is an attempt to explain the problem of interpretation in More's novel and to show its ambiguity. By comparing earlier interpretations to each other, to the text itself and to our knowledge about More, the essay aims to clarify More's intention to leave *Utopia* open for individual interpretation and to encourage critical thinking in sixteenth-century England.

Keywords: Sir Thomas More, *Utopia*, England, sixteenth century, satire, ambiguity, criticism, interpretation

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Introduction

As Greenblatt and Logan suggest, Sir Thomas More was “one of the most brilliant, compelling and disturbing figures of the English Renaissance” (569). He surely was brilliant and compelling in one way or another, but disturbing? People who never devoted their attention to him, his life and his works may have problems understanding this description by Greenblatt and Logan. But the more one examines the matter, the clearer it becomes that it is indeed nearly impossible to really understand and comprehend him as a person or as an author. The Catholic Church for example made him a saint, even though his book *Utopia* was prohibited by the Catholic bishops of sixteenth-century Spain and Portugal. Leading Communists are convinced that *Utopia* represents a forerunner of the communist plan to abolish private property, while Karl Marx despised those socialists he called “utopian”. And finally, middle-class liberals who admired his vision of free public education, had to realize that More embraces the idea of the forced labor camp in *Utopia*. It becomes clear that Greenblatt and Logan chose their words carefully. The ambiguity they describe, however, was one of the main reasons why I chose to examine this book and its author in this essay. I want to explain my interpretation of *Utopia* and why I believe there is a meaning to the book that is difficult to grasp and understand, but whose misinterpretation can lead to a misunderstanding of the book’s purpose.

More was born in 1477 in London and studied classical languages and law. Living with Franciscan friars, he considered priesthood, but chose a career as lawyer instead. Later in his life (after the composition of *Utopia*), he became a member of the English parliament and in 1529 even Lord Chancellor. Although he was close to Henry VIII, the king’s rejection of the Catholic Church “occasioned a breach between the two” (Claeys 60) and after being tried for treason, More was beheaded in July 1535.

With his novel *Utopia*, he did not only cause serious confusion amongst his critics and his loyal friends and admirers, but also created a hitherto uncharted literary genre. The word “utopia” was coined by More himself. It comes from Greek *ou* (“not”) and *topos* (“place”) and might contain a pun on *eu topos* “happy place” (Greenblatt and Logan 572). The island of Utopia, which is described in the book, then is a fictional and desirable place.

The novel consists of two books. Book I is called “The First Book of the Communication of Raphael Hythloday, Concerning the Best State of a Commonwealth” and

contains a discussion between Thomas More, Raphael Hythloday and Peter Giles on whether or not Hythloday should offer his services as a Counselor to the King. Even though the characters More, Giles and John Morton, correspond to actual people, they cannot be considered to have the same opinions as the historic personalities, because *Utopia* is still a work of fiction. Book II, on the other hand, contains a description of the geography and history of the island Utopia and a discussion of its society. It is called “The Second Book of the Communication of Raphael Hythloday, Concerning the Best State of a Commonwealth: containing the description of Utopia, with a large declaration of the politic government and of all the good laws and orders of the same island”.

More wrote the book while he was on a diplomatic mission in the Netherlands and many assume that it was his way of dealing with his inner conflicts, as for example being “torn between a career as a lawyer and a life of religious devotion” (Greenblatt and Logan 569). After all he entered the council of Henry VIII not long after he completed *Utopia*. There is no doubt however, that the novel provides a critique of England’s society at the time, as well as of the political, royal and religious leaders of the sixteenth century and that it can thus be called a work of political philosophy. The novel was first published in 1516 in the Latin language and has been translated many times and by many people since then. To have a text that is the closest possible to the original, I chose quite an old translation, namely the one by Ralph Robinson, which was published in 1556.

In my opinion, *Utopia* is a satirical reflection on the social and political problems of England in the sixteenth century, while, at the same time, showing ambiguity in the proposed solutions. In order to pursue this argument, I will firstly focus on English history and the society that More lived in and begin by introducing the problems of sixteenth century England that are directly discussed in Book I of *Utopia*. Then, I will point out those elements of the text that are satirical and those that are not. In the second chapter, I will focus on Book II and will introduce the problems of sixteenth century England that here are discussed indirectly as well as the solutions that Hythloday’s description of Utopia suggests. Finally, I will explain which of the elements of Book II are satirical in order to clarify the ambiguity of the text as well as of the novel as a whole, while stating the importance of this feature to the interpretation of the book. To make my argument more credible, I will describe and compare selected interpretations of the book that argue for different points of view when it comes to More's intentions.

Satire was invented by the ancient Romans and used by the poets Horace and Juvenal. Its form was originally a dialogue between the main speaker and an objecting adversary, who describe and discuss “episodes in contemporary city life that show its absurdity and excess” (online: Baldick). The Greek writer Lucian later wrote tales about fictitious and fantastic planets that implied a biting critique of society and that inspired Thomas More who was a great admirer of Lucian. More’s *Utopia* initiated what is called “the greatest period of satire – the 17th and 18th centuries” (online: Kors). The ancient Romans used this type of texts to criticize folly, affectation and criminality in high office. Today, it is still used to “expose the failings of individuals, institutions or [even whole] societies” (online: Kors).

Amongst literary critics, there are very different opinions as to what Thomas More intended to say with his text, what or whom he wanted to criticize and what solutions he proposes. Some believe that he actually was convinced of the greatness of the island of Utopia and its society, while others believe that it is meant to be a satire. Gregory Claeys, for example, explains in his book *Searching for Utopia: The History of an Idea* that More left many questions as to the meaning of the book open, and wonders whether the text is “a critique? A recipe? A lament? A satire?” (67). Tore Frängsmyr, however, is convinced of the seriousness of Thomas More’s novel and believes that communist ideas are the background to this book (14) that praises equality and the abolishment of private property. On the other hand, Robert C. Elliott declares in his book *The Shape of Utopia*, that “it is in Thomas More’s *Utopia* itself that the two modes satire and utopia are most clearly seen to be indivisible” (22). What I, however, intend to point out is the ambiguity of More’s work that leaves the reader confused and even desperate to find an answer to the question of what More actually wanted to achieve with his novel.

Book I: Satire

In the first chapter, I will focus on Book I of Utopia. I will describe the problems of sixteenth century England that are mentioned and criticized by Thomas More, while at the same time pointing out which passages imply satirical elements. By the use of the character Raphael Hythloday, Thomas More discusses essential problems of the English society. In this Book, he discusses them directly and brings out exactly what the problem is. The most important social and political problems mentioned are the death penalty for theft and poverty caused by the corruption of the upper classes and the enclosures.

During the sixteenth century there were more than two hundred crimes that were punishable by death, including stealing from someone's house, a shop or from nature, cutting down a tree for example. While the death penalty already was the highest punishment, there were procedures that were more cruel than others. One example is boiling to death, which was a common way of execution during the sixteenth century and was approved by Henry VIII in 1531. The government and the upper classes in England thought the death penalty an appropriate punishment for theft because they believed it would frighten the people enough to make them not steal and would establish the authority of the reigning class (online: Castelli). Only under the reign of Henry VIII, the numbers of those put to death were “estimated as high as 72,000” (online: Reggio). Hythloday on the other hand, explains in Book I that he is convinced that the death penalty for theft is both impractical and unethical. Impractical, because the fact that theft and murder have the same punishment might provoke thieves to actually kill the person they stole from in order to reduce the risk of being caught. By explaining the irony of a punishment that provokes the criminal to commit a crime that is worse than the one he intended to commit in the first place, Hythloday shows his talent as a satirist for the first time. He also believes the punishment to be unethical, because it puts men's law above God's and transgresses the commandment not to kill. Using irony, he asks: “If any man would [...] define killing to be lawful, [...] why may [...] not likewise [...] whoredom, fornication and perjury [...] be lawful?” (26). Moreover, he explains, that for such a crime as stealing, the death penalty is far “too extreme and cruel” (19).

The most important reason for people to steal, however, were the unemployment and the “rapid price inflation” (online: Castelli) during that time. Most people were farmers, but the enclosures made unemployment increase rapidly. Land owners decided to change from

arable land to sheep farming, which required much less time and money, but left their tenants without work and food. These were then forced to leave their villages to search for work. This, however, was considered a crime and the punishment was being whipped. Additionally, all monasteries of the Catholic Church were closed down in 1530, which, on the one hand, increased the unemployment further and, on the other hand, created more problems for the lower classes, since the monasteries also had helped provide food for the poor (online: "Poverty in Tudor Times"). Thus, ordinary people had a difficult time providing for their families and themselves. The price inflation, which was mainly caused by population growth, made it nearly impossible for them to survive. According to Raphael Hythloday, there were three professions that were affected by the poverty and unemployment, which dominated England during the sixteenth century, in particular. First of all, he mentions the soldiers, who "put their lives in jeopardy for the weal-public's or the king's sake" (19), but who have to live unemployed and therefore poor when they return from war or battle. He explains, that "by reason of weakness and lameness [they are] not able to occupy their old crafts" (19) and are usually too old to learn new ones. He is also concerned about the serving men, who grow up idle and "as soon as their master is dead, [...] be [...] thrust out of doors" (19) without being educated or having learned any craft to occupy themselves with. The last and maybe most important group that Hythloday talks about, are the farmers. On the one hand, they are exploited by their lessors, who "live [...] of that which others have laboured for" (19) and who "poll and shave their tenants to the quick by raising their rents" (19). On the other hand, they are driven away from their land by voracious noblemen and even "abbots" (22), leaving them and their families without a home, without work and without any possessions. He does not, however, blame this on the gentlemen and abbots directly, but uses satire instead and makes fun of them. He portrays their sheep as "great devourers and so wild, that they eat up and swallow down the very men themselves" (22), while he calls the abbots "holy men no doubt" (22). Using exaggeration, he criticizes not only the action of enclosing land itself, but also the upper classes' arrogance to be the reason for the unemployment while, at the same time, punishing those who try to survive by stealing. Therefore, Hythloday asks: "What other thing do you than make thieves and then punish them?" (24), accusing the upper classes of punishing the thieves whom they themselves created in the first place.

There are very different opinions regarding the question whether *Utopia* was meant to be a satire or not. Robert C. Elliott, for example, explains in his book *The Shape of Utopia*

that “*Utopia* has the shape and the feel – it has much of the form – of satire” (29). To prove this, he begins his chapter on More's book by criticizing the 'Catholic' interpretation - in this case the one by Edward L. Surtz, Father Surtz - which seems to compare the major issues of *Utopia* to already fixed “classical, scriptural, patristic, and humanist” (28) ideas and attitudes and cannot be taken seriously for that reason. Instead, he wants to provide us with an interpretation that deals with the question of communism as incorporated into the book's structure. The first method Elliott uses to convince the reader of the satirical meaning of the book, is by comparing it to the form and the content of ancient Roman satire. He declares, that “More knew ancient satire well” and that “Lucian was one of his favorite authors” (32). *Utopia* should be thought of as a prose version with variations on the formal verse satire, which was composed by Horace, Juvenal and later Lucian. He continues by explaining that there are two sides to *Utopia* as well as to Roman satire. On the one hand, there is the negative part, which exposes the foolish behavior of religious as political leaders and the overall bad conditions of the country. On the other hand, there is the positive part, against which the negative part is judged and which provides us with a “normative model to be imitated” (30). Elliott also uses the examples of two passages of Book I to show the satirical meaning of the text. Firstly, he uses Hythloday's description of an argument between a fool and a friar, which developed at a dinner that he attended with Cardinal Morton. The fool had made comments on the venality of monks and priests and had therefore made the friar angry, who started calling the fool names and finally threatened to “invoke the curse of Elisha against the fool and to excommunicate him” (33). Elliott explains that some elements of the scene, for example, the character of contest and performance [...] and the threat of a fatal curse” (34) remind of the first texts, “the primitive stuff”, from which formal satire developed. Moreover, the scene seems to resemble a scene in Horace's *Satires* 1.7. Secondly, Elliott uses a passage from the book in which Hythloday makes fun of the landlords who enclosed their land and are responsible for the poverty of the lower class population:

There is another (necessary cause of stealing), which, as I suppose, is proper and peculiar to you Englishmen alone. What is that? quoth the cardinal.

Forsooth, my lord, quoth I, your sheep that were wont to be so meek and tame and so small eaters, now, as I hear say, be become so great devourers and so wild, that they eat up and swallow down the very men themselves. They consume, destroy, and devour whole fields, houses, and cities. For look in what parts of the realm doth grow the finest and therefore dearest wool, there noblemen and gentlemen, yea

and certain abbots, holy men no doubt, not contenting themselves with the yearly revenues and profits that were wont to grow to their forefathers and predecessors of their lands, nor being content that they live in rest and pleasure nothing profiting, yea, much annoying the weal-public, leave no ground for tillage. They enclose all into pastures; they throw down houses; they pluck down towns, and leave nothing standing but only the church to be made a sheep-house.

Elliott states that Raphael Hythloday is consistent with his role as a satirist throughout Book I, but this “single passage [...] is enough to establish [his] superb talent” (34) as one. Hythloday uses characteristic devices of the satirist here: the personification of the vicious sheep and the “reality-destroying language” (35). The passage leaves no doubt as to the irony of Hythloday.

Another opinion, however, is the one of Susan Bruce, which is similar to the interpretation of Father Surtz, or a 'Catholic' interpretation in general. Both are convinced that the communism which Hythloday describes in the fictional work cannot possibly be something that More wished to establish in any country, not to mention England. Bruce begins her argument with translating the name 'Hythloday', which is Greek and means 'peddler of nonsense', or 'expert in trifles' (xxii). This is undoubtedly no coincidence but rather More's way of warning those who read the text as a “straightforward critique” (xxii) and a “serious proposal for an alternative social organization” (xxii). According to Susan Bruce, this is not the only time More uses irony. The text is “punctuated with similar jokes, littered with traps” (xxii). As an example, she uses the passage of Book I, in which Hythloday explains how the Polylerites, inhabitants of the “land of nonsense” (xxii), abolished capital punishment, and that this is what he believes should be established in England. Instead of the death penalty, the Polylerites use bonded labor to punish their criminals. These bondmen are marked by a special clothing which has another color than the one of the rest of the population, by short haircuts and by the excision of the tip of one ear.

Neither they can have any hope at all to scape away by fleeing. For how should a man that in no part of his apparel is like other men fly privily and unknown, unless he would run away naked? Howbeit, so also fleeing he should be descried by the rounding of his head and his ear mark.

Bruce asks: “If the Polylerites saw a naked man running across the countryside, would they really need to pay attention to his haircut, or stop him in order to examine his ears?” (xxii). It seems rather unlikely that More should have missed the irony in this passage and made the joke accidentally. But this is not the only satirical element which this part of the work points

out. Hythloday explains that receiving money from anyone implies the death penalty for a bondman. They cannot touch weapons, are not allowed to cast away their badges, cannot be seen outside their own shire, cannot talk to a bondman from another shire, or intend to run away in general. Accordingly, the Polylerites actually have not abolished the death penalty, as Hythloday claims at the beginning of the discussion, but merely concealed it. This kind of inconsistency, where an “initial claim to liberty is curtailed by its subsequent elaboration” (xxiii), is a feature of *Utopia* that appears not only once, but several times. Bruce quotes Greenblatt here, who states that “freedoms are heralded, only to shrink in the course of the description” (xxiii).

In my opinion, there is no doubt about the irony of this part of the novel, which makes the implied political and social criticism come across even more biting. Combining the critics’ interpretations, I believe that Hythloday’s description of the enclosures and the puns on almost all names in *Utopia* especially point towards a satirical meaning of Book I. This means that this part of the work might well be the positive part of a satire, which exposes the flaws of the English society and its leaders. Accepting Elliott’s interpretation however, would also imply accepting his belief in communist ideas as incorporated in the novel. But as I will point out towards the end of chapter two, this essay aims to clarify that the book neither praises communism, nor neglects it in any way. It rather describes it as an option, a possible organization of a state.

Clearly, it is not the first part of the novel that causes confusion and problems in interpreting the work. Both critics agree on the existence of satirical elements in Book I of *Utopia*, even if they reach their conclusions in different ways. While Elliott focuses on the elements in *Utopia* that resemble the structure of original Greek satire, Bruce analyses the text and points out which parts are ironical and use satirical language. The second book, however, seems to be more difficult to interpret. The following chapter will begin with a comparison of sixteenth century England and the problems of the English society that are implied in the solutions, which Hythloday indicates in his description of the island Utopia. Then, I will illustrate the obvious ambiguity of the work, by describing and explaining the critical interpretations by Elliott, Bruce, Claeys and Frängsmyr, which could not differ more.

Book II: Ambiguity

In Book II of *Utopia*, More only implies the problems he wants to criticize indirectly by describing the way the Utopians solved them. Accordingly, he discusses the opposite of what he wants to criticize. In this book, Raphael Hythloday describes the geography and history of the island and discusses its society. More uses this discussion to imply which other features of the English society seem problematic to him. Amongst other issues, he mentions the corruption and tyranny of the government and king as well as the outdated educational system.

During the fifteenth century, the dynastic dispute between the houses of York and Lancaster cost many people's lives and cast a shadow over England and its population. The wars were called "The Wars of the Roses" because of the badges of both houses, which were a white and a red rose. These wars were not finished earlier than 1485 (More was around eight years old), when Henry VII defeated Richard III at Bosworth Field. With Henry VII the long and strong reign of the Tudor dynasty began and lasted for over 115 years (online: "Wars of the Roses"). Apart from the wars that remained in the memory of the English population, the Tudors as well as the upper classes were corrupt and arbitrary in their rule. An example of this is Henry VIII, who changed the religion of the entire country to get what he wanted: a divorce from Catherine of Aragon. Hythloday, however, describes the government of Utopia as one that is close to a democratic one. The prince and his "Tranibores" (56) are elected by the people of Utopia and the utopian law sees to it that they "might not easily conspire together to oppress the people by tyranny and to change the state of the weal-public" (56). Accordingly, Thomas More was concerned about the corruption and tyranny of the king and the upper classes. He wanted to avoid the fact that the king – prince in this case – can decide things that affect the entire state alone and without supervision.

Additionally, More criticizes the outdated and unequal educational system, which excludes women and the poor and does not give them any possibilities to receive academic knowledge. As a humanist, More also calls for a new curriculum, which focuses on literacy and cultural knowledge instead of training for the church (Greenblatt and Logan 569). His own children, four daughters and a son, were unusually highly educated. Carefully chosen tutors and teachers taught them in "Latin, Greek, Logic, Philosophy, Theology, Mathematics and Astronomy" (online: McGovern). Not only was it unusual to teach children in these

subjects, but it was also unheard of that boys and girls were taught together. Hythloday mentions the equality of the Utopians concerning learning and education. Not only does each and every one of them learn his or her profession, but they also spend those hours of the day that they are free from work, studying literature. He points out that "a great multitude of every sort of people, both men and women, go to hear lectures" (58) every day.

During the sixteenth century the Reformation began and with it the dispute between Martin Luther and the Roman Catholic Church, which he believed grew corrupt and did not follow the original Christian spirit anymore. As a defender of Catholicism, living during the Reformation, and as a counselor to a king who wants a divorce and who rejects the Catholic Church, Thomas More was against Protestantism and fought it and its creator Martin Luther. He was not content with everything the Catholic Church did, but, at the same time, he was afraid and concerned about the division of the Church caused by the Reformation (Claeys 64). Henry VIII parted with the Catholic Church because the pope denied him a divorce from his second wife Catherine of Aragon. When he declared himself head of the English Church, he demanded the people of England to swear an oath of loyalty. More, however, refused to swear the oath and was therefore beheaded. Hythloday explains that all religions in Utopia have the belief in one chief God "Mithra" (107) in common. The main religion, however, is quite similar to Protestantism and represents another problem of the sixteenth century that More intends to criticize. Religion in *Utopia* in general seems to imply more freedom; it allows women priests, divorce and encourages euthanasia.

Another problem Hythloday mentions in his discussion is man slaughter (murder), which he believes men learned from the slaughter of beasts. He also discusses the problems of pestilent diseases, brought into the cities with dead animals, and the multitude of lawyers, which he regards as superfluous. In Utopia every man "should plead his own matter" (94), so that the judge only hears the man's version of the story, instead of the version that some "lawyer hath instruct with deceit" (94).

If we take a closer look at these problems, it is quite peculiar that most of them have to do with private property (theft, poverty, corrupt upper classes etc.). In fact, private property is the most important and biggest problem Hythloday points out in his discussion about the Utopian society and it was the most important and biggest problem in sixteenth century England. Most people were unemployed and therefore poor at the same time as they had to fight diseases, which, due to underdeveloped medical care, could eradicate entire cities. The

Utopians, however, have solved this problem by abolishing private property in total. Money, gold and precious stones do not have any value on the island. Instead, everybody is equal and food, as well as everything else a person might need, is distributed by the public. Whether or not Thomas More actually suggested this as a solution for the English society remains to be seen.

According to Elliott, Book II is the positive part of the satire that establishes a model against which the first Book is judged. It is still satiric, he argues, but “it is as though the normal proportions of satire are reversed” (40). Thus, the presentation of Utopian life points out the difference “between what is and what ought to be” (42). Arguing for a satirical meaning of More's work, Elliott explains that the Utopians' sense of satire is not expressed by words, but by actions. The example he uses is gold, which plays a rather odd role in Utopia. Not only do the Utopians despise people from other countries that wear gold and precious clothes, they also fetter their bondmen with chains of gold and let their children play with it. Excessive clothes, pearls, precious stones and all riches are regarded as a sign of foolishness and ridiculousness. However, the most important part of the second book is the dialogue after the description of Utopia and its society. The character More says in the book that even though he did not like everything that Hythloday told about the Utopian way of life, there were many things “in the Utopian weal-public which in our cities [he] may rather wish for than hope for” (45). It is clear that More in the book does not believe in the possibility of establishing institutions in England as the ones we learn about in the presentation of Utopia, but he does wish it were possible. Additionally, Father Surtz, who is quoted by Elliott, believes, that Hythloday also “realizes that given the general run of Christians, his commonwealth, like the republic of Plato, will never exist in the Christian West” (28). So, More in the book, as well as Hythloday, know that a state such as Utopia is impossible to establish, but is nevertheless desirable. Furthermore, Elliott touches the problem of interpreting the communist ideas whose presence in the book is unquestionable. He believes, that More, the author, in fact thought communism to be the only way of achieving a functioning, happy society and state. He explains, that More gives Hythloday, who pleads for communism, “all the good lines” (48) and lets him elaborate on the Utopian state and its ways, while More, who is of the opposite opinion, only gets to describe his opinions in very narrow parts of the work. Concluding, Elliott claims, that this interpretation collides with many, and especially the Catholic, interpretations of the text, but it does not conflict with the

quote of R. W. Chambers, who writes: “When a Sixteenth-Century Catholic depicts a pagan state founded on Reason and Philosophy, he is not depicting his ultimate ideal” (49). Elliott points out that there are two different ways of interpreting the work: on the one hand, More may have wanted an actual reform in the existing institutions in England, while on the other hand, the work may be a model of the ideal state and society which More did not intend to establish, but which he believed would lead to true happiness for everyone, a fictional, imaginary state.

Bruce, however, has an entirely different opinion and is convinced that Book II “subvert[s] the apparent ideal by making explicit criticisms of its untenability” (xix) and that there is an “incongruence between 'ideal' Utopian practices and what we know of More's own life and beliefs” (xix). Her first argument concerns the names in *Utopia*, which play jokes on the reader. The “Anyder” (Greek: “waterless”) for example, is the main river of the capital of Utopia, “Amaurote” (Greek: “dim city”) (xxi-xxii). Furthermore, Utopia and England, which are supposed to be opposites of each other, are actually quite similar. Both are islands, for example, and the two capitals, Amaurote and London, show certain similarities (both have a river amongst other things). Bruce states that “Utopia becomes more a distorted reflection of the 'real' England than its antithesis” (xxiv). After this, Bruce comes back to the incongruence between More's beliefs and Utopian practices. She explains that the society which Hythloday describes, “banishes lawyers, allows women priests, tolerates the expression of pagan beliefs, encourages euthanasia, and permits not only divorce but subsequent remarriage” (xxv). More on the other hand, was a lawyer himself, a staunch Catholic who fought against Luther and the reformation, participating in the burning of heretics and losing his life defending the belief that the King's divorce from Catherine of Aragon was wrong. Bruce claims that this man can not have possibly been convinced of the ideality of the state he created in his work. Her next argument is, that the character More in the book, does not believe in the Utopian state: “many things,” he argues, “came to my mind which in the manners and laws of that people seemed to be [...] founded of no good reason” (xxv). The most important argument for Bruce's case, however, is that More in the book does not believe in communism, which is the single “most radical aspect of Utopia” (xxv).

Many things came to my mind which [...] seemed to be [...] founded of no good reason [...] in [...] the principal foundation of all their ordinances, that is to say, in the community of their [...] living without any [...] money (by the which thing only all nobility, magnificence, worship, honour, and majesty, the

true ornaments and honours [...] of a commonwealth, utterly be overthrown and destroyed).

Another opinion on Thomas More's intention with his text is the one of Claeys, who after describing the dialogue in Book I and the presentation of the Utopian state in Book II of *Utopia*, begins explaining why he believes that the second part neither forwards a satirical meaning, nor implies communist ideas. Firstly, he describes the dialogue between Hythloday and More in the book. Hythloday is very enthusiastic about communism and declares that it alone can “permit justice and happiness to flourish” (67). More, however, responds that without the hope for any personal gain, a man will grow lazy, which, according to Claeys, is “his most persuasive objection to the Utopian constitution” (67). But Claeys seems to forget, that the character More in the book cannot be confused with More the author, whose opinion on the Utopian constitution and on communism are unclear. Secondly, Claeys claims that the text defends certain monastic as well as Platonic ideals and practices, as, for example, the abolishment of private property and uniform clothes. However, the text does not claim they were “nationally applicable in any other than an ethical sense” (69). This means that the Utopian state or way of life is not supposed to reform England itself and its institutions, but the people that inhabit it. Claeys states that the answers More gives in *Utopia* are moral answers to society's problems, they do not provide answers to social and economic problems. Thus, More did not believe a state like the Utopian to be viable in the human world, which on the other hand, can become more merciful and charitable. Claeys explains that More rather becomes a great Catholic believing in an afterlife, than a great communist as for example Karl Kautsky, a German philosopher, defender of communism and friend of Karl Marx, claimed. According to Claeys, More believed “mercy and charity are suitable to this life, complete happiness only to the next” (69).

An opinion that differs radically from the others, is the one of Tore Frängsmyr. The Swedish professor in the History of Science cannot understand how some critics try to argue against the obvious communism in More's book. He is convinced of its presence in More's work and the fact that it is based on Christian and humanist ideas. Moreover, he explains that *Utopia* should not be read as something positive or as an ideal state, but as an attack on the English society and its leaders exposing their evil and injustice. Touching upon the question about religion in Utopia, he says that More might have died for his belief in the Roman Catholic Church, but in an ideal society he wished for a “purer” (14) form of religion, just like the one he describes in *Utopia*. Concluding, Frängsmyr declares that “there is no doubt about

him being a communist, in the word's best meaning" (16), who dreamed of a society in which nobody should suffer and everybody should be equal. He is aware of the fact that More was ahead of the times with the communist ideas which he proposes, but he explains: "If people in certain circles want to see Jesus as the first communist, they could at least see Thomas More as the second" (16).

My interpretation of More's work is a far simpler one. I believe the second book is neither an ongoing satirical critique, as Bruce suggests, nor the description of an ideal state, as Elliott claims. Resembling Claeys' interpretation of the work, I rather believe that More did not intend to reform England's institutions in the sixteenth century, but the people who inhabited the country. In a Christian sense, he wanted them to be more merciful and charitable. *Utopia* challenges the established social order and encourages the English population to question the society they live in and to criticize it without accepting the inevitability of poverty. Thus, *Utopia* describes two sides of the same coin, two possible "Englands", so to speak, and discusses their advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, we have England represented by the character More who admits his country's and his people's flaws, but who defends and believes in the overall organization of the state. On the other hand, we have Utopia represented by Hythloday who does not admit any flaws in the institutions of the country, but whose description of it shows off certain elements of satire and irony, as, for example, the ridicule of gold and rich people, which the author integrates intentionally to make clear that this state, which appears so flawless and pure, is not at all so perfect. This ambiguity and the lack of any indication in terms of which "England" the author himself prefers, give the reader the possibility to combine elements of both and to – fictionally – "construct" his or her own ideal state.

While *Utopia* reflects on two possible "Englands", I also believe that it was More's way of dealing with his own inner conflicts. The discussion between the character More and Hythloday as to whether or not Hythloday should join the King's Council, implies two opposing opinions, which I believe represent More's indecision. He needed to determine whether or not he himself should become a Counselor to the King. By studying *Utopia*, we cannot find out which conclusion More reaches at the end of his work. However, considering his life, we realize, that he actually did join the Council not long after he completed *Utopia*. When it comes to the meaning of the book, however, the author's life does not help us in any way to find out what he intended to achieve. His actions as a Counselor to the King do not

match either of the states that he suggests in *Utopia*. We simply have to accept the fact, that the book is open for interpretation and that we cannot understand More's opinions and thoughts. This, however, cannot be thought of as a bad thing in any way. The ambiguity of the text preserves its alterity and gives the reader the possibility to interpret *Utopia* from many different points of view, while making the novel's concerns universally appealing.

Conclusion

The differences between the various theories and interpretations of More's text show how difficult it is to understand the novel and him as a person. Elliott and Bruce agree on a satirical meaning of the first book and surely their arguments seem reasonable. There is no doubt about More intending to criticize the society and the leaders of England during that time and the satirical elements do not only amuse the reader, but at the same time make the critique come across even clearer and more biting. However, the opinions of all four critics diverge very much when it comes to the interpretation of the second book. Elliott believes, Book II is the second part of a satire and a normative model, an ideal state, that More believed in. Bruce on the other hand, is of the opinion that the second book also is satirical and that More simply goes on making fun of the English society and its leaders. Claeys explains that More believed in the greatness of his fictional state, but did not want to establish such a one in England, because he thought it impossible. He only wanted to reform the people, not the country. Frängsmyr, however, is convinced of More's seriousness. He sees *Utopia* as a straightforward critique on England and as More's attempt to convince the reader of a great communist state.

As I suggested before, I believe the book is meant to reform the way of thinking in sixteenth-century England and not its institutions. The ambiguity of Book II and the balance of satire and seriousness are confusing. But instead of regarding this confusion as a lack and forcing upon ourselves and upon More one or the other fixed reading of the text, we should accept it, think critically and construct our own ideal state. In that sense, More made his work applicable to all states, all times and all readers. Accordingly, further research should not focus on examining whether or not More believed the Utopian state to be great or tenable, but should follow More's suggestion and focus on the problems of our society today. It may point out the similarities between England in the sixteenth century and the social conditions encountered today and point towards *Utopia's* immense relevance five hundred years after its composition.

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