

The Pittsburgh Savoyards Present

Utopia, Limited;

or,

The Flowers of Progress

A Comic Operetta in Two Acts

Music by Sir Arthur S. Sullivan

Libretto by Sir William S. Gilbert



Study Guide:

Show History and Literature Connections

A Brief History of Utopia

In 1890 while *The Gondoliers* was in production, Gilbert and Sullivan became embroiled in a legal dispute with their producer, each taking opposite sides. Gilbert vowed to write no more for the company, even going so far as to withdraw the rights to his libretti when *The Gondoliers* closed in 1891. After later mediation with their publisher, Gilbert and Sullivan reconciled and began to plan to renew their work on a new opera, *Utopia, Limited*.

The two men were still distrustful and embittered from the lawsuit and their final collaborations were much less congenial than their former works. They disagreed on several key points, including the character of Lady Sophy and how to set the lyrics to music. Gilbert filled the show with longer-than-usual dialogue sections and Sullivan retaliated with extended orchestral sections, dance interludes, and long chorus sections.

Utopia, Limited was strongly influenced by current events. In 1893, the year *Utopia, Limited* was produced, the Hawaiian Princess Kaiulani of the then independent monarchy of Hawaii attended a private school in England. This was much talked about in social columns and gossip papers, leading many to speculate on the influence that English “civilization” would have on the Princess and her homeland. The story was also influenced by a book published by Anna Leonowens, *The English Governess at the Siamese Court*. This story was also the basis for the Rogers and Hammerstein musical *The King and I*. These two stories influenced the characters of Princess Zara and Lady Sophy, respectively.

As operettas typically do, *Utopia, Limited* has a strong element of satire. Not only did it explore the idea of civilizing native cultures and jingoism, but it also poked fun at England’s Limited Liability Act of 1862, British imperialism, the monarchy, English prudery, English airs, and party politics. By setting the show on an imaginary island, Gilbert and Sullivan were free to make sharp use of satire in way that would have been impossible had they used a realistic setting.

Audiences were thrilled to see Gilbert and Sullivan back together again. The critics, however, had a more mixed response. It was called everything from “limited indeed” to the “very best”. The show ran longer and cost more than any previous Gilbert and

Sullivan operetta, but despite it all *Utopia, Limited* still managed to make a modest profit.

Utopia, Limited ran for 245 performances, a shorter run than any of Gilbert and Sullivan's other 1880s shows. After it closed, it toured briefly, but the cost of production was so high that tours and revivals were abandoned. *Utopia* was not revived by D'Oyly Carte Opera Company until 1975, at which point it sold out so quickly that additional performances had to be added.

Since then, it has been performed by various amateur companies, although with nowhere near the popularity of other Gilbert and Sullivan shows, again due to the high cost of production and long running time of the show. Many of these newer productions are highly revised and redacted, cutting sections of dialogues, dance, and orchestral interludes to help make the show shorter and more coherent. This production of *Utopia, Limited* by the Pittsburgh Savoyards is the first production of the show ever in Pittsburgh.

A Company Limited. What May That Mean?

In *Utopia, Limited* the citizens of the island of Utopia declare themselves to be a limited company in accordance with England's Joint Stock Company Act of 1862. A limited company is a company in which the stockholders or members have a liability, or financial responsibility, that is limited to what they have invested in the company. The 1862 Act declared that a company could be made up of seven or more persons and made it easier for small investors to pool together their resources and incorporate with a limited personal risk, because liability is limited to what has been invested and cannot spill over into an investor's personal assets. In the United States, this might be known as a corporation.

Utopia and Dystopia

Utopian fiction is a genre of literature that explores political and social structures in the context of an ideal society. In *Utopia, Limited* it's the very name of the imaginary island on which our story takes place. The word **utopia** was first used by Sir Thomas More in his 1516 work *Utopia*. The word hints at both the Greek words for "no place" and "good place". An even earlier example of a utopia, although the word is never actually used, is

Plato's *Republic*. Prior to 1900, over 400 English-language works were published, attesting to the popularity of envisioning an ideal society.

Dystopian literature explores the flip side of idealized society. Instead of a world where all is right, a **dystopia** is characterized by oppression, injustice, and inequity, usually brought on by society itself. Keith Booker wrote that dystopian literature can “provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural or inevitable.” In fact, many of the great dystopian stories begin with someone else's utopia.

While the production itself is relatively light, *Utopia, Limited* has both utopian and dystopian elements. In the beginning of the operetta, we see an ideal island utopia, with pretty maids drifting about “in lazy languor motionless.” As the story goes on, we see that things are not quite as they seem. The king is controlled by outside forces who have their own agenda and the peaceful tranquility of the island is being wished away on a dream of British “civilization.” When the so-called Flowers of Progress do have their way with the isle of Utopia, the citizenry is convinced in fairly short order to find fault with the new utopia and demand a return to the old.

While the dystopian elements of *Utopia, Limited* never progress to Hunger Games level, we still see a familiar trajectory laid out in many utopia-dystopia stories. Like Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, *Utopia, Limited* allows us to explore what is both good and bad in a society. As in Lois Duncan's young adult novel *The Giver*, *Utopia, Limited* begins as a utopia and then gradually spins out the dystopian elements so we can see that someone's utopia is someone else's dystopia. And as in Ursula K. LeGuin's *Always Coming Home*, *Utopia, Limited* explores the idea that the choices we make now can lead to a better or worse world in the future. Of course, being that this is a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, the formulaic ending winds up with a mass wedding and a happily ever after and the Island of Utopia is returned to a true utopian society once again... at least for now.