

ANALYSIS

Looking Backward, 2000-1887 (1888)



Edward Bellamy

(1850-1898)

Looking Backward is the most important American Utopian novel. It stimulated Utopian thinking throughout the world and by 1900 it had become the third most popular book in American literature, after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Ben-Hur*. It became the prototype for 46 other Utopian novels published in the United States 1889-1900. In 1935 several prominent historians and social philosophers listed *Looking Backward* as the most influential book written by an American during the preceding half century, second only to *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx. Among the thinkers and politicians influenced by the book: John Dewey, Thorstein Veblen, Upton Sinclair, Eugene Debs and Norman Thomas. One of the few books ever to inspire a political mass movement, *Looking Backward* led to the founding of 65 Bellamy clubs throughout the United States devoted to discussion and the propagation of the Socialist principles advocated by Bellamy, as well as the creation of the Populist Party, which at its peak attracted over one million votes.

Looking Backward was written in a period of severe labor turmoil and social disruption, such as the 1886 Haymarket Riots in Chicago and many strikes throughout the country. This was the "Gilded Age" of unregulated free enterprise capitalism, robber barons, brutal industrial exploitation, government graft, increasing immigration and widespread poverty. Unlike the pessimistic visions of the future later dramatized by Huxley in *Brave New World* and by Orwell in *1984*, warning of totalitarianism, *Looking Backward* is optimistic. Bellamy was a Christian who considered love of the human race the essence of Christ's example. He turned against established churches because they were not actively promoting the Golden Rule. In his view, they had become irrelevant.

BELLAMY'S UTOPIA

1. The State owns all means of production.
2. Otherwise everyone owns personal property.
3. Society is organized so rationally it satisfies all human needs.
4. Everyone is equal.

5. Everyone is happy.
6. Everyone chooses his own occupation.
7. Everyone is given the same income.
8. Everyone serves society for 24 years as a worker or professional.
9. Everyone enjoys a comfortable standard of living.
10. Christian morality prevails and everyone loves everyone.

MARXIST

1. State ownership of all means of production
2. Equality of income
3. Classless society

NON-MARXIST

1. Christian rather than Atheist
2. Exaltation of the individual rather than the State
3. Transformation of society by evolution rather than by revolution
4. Permanent rather than temporary centralized government

CRITICISMS OF BELLAMY'S UTOPIA

1. There is no effective democracy, as only those over 45 who are *not* workers in the industrial army can vote.
2. The majority is subject to the dictates of the bureaucracy. Bellamy did not foresee the dangers of a managerial society that tends to produce machines who act like men and men who must act like machines. See cybernetic fiction.
3. Bellamy's society is static and dull, as there is no need for any further development, no future but insipid bliss--like a boring Heaven for bureaucrats.
4. Although lip service is paid to spiritual values, Bellamy's emphasis is upon materialistic comfort and security, a brave new world of conformity and consumerism.
5. Christian love is not prevailing in America.
6. Regimentation is slavery. Give me liberty or give me death.
7. Human beings are selfish.
8. The Socialist countries of Europe became secular, abandoned Christianity, entitled themselves into economic stagnation and are now depopulating and appeasing themselves into extinction.

Michael Hollister (2015)

THE PLOT

"Julian West, the narrator, is a wealthy Bostonian who in 1887 is engaged to be married to Edith Bartlett. He is subject to insomnia and sleeps in a tomblike chamber beneath the foundation of his house, sometimes hiring a hypnotist to put him to sleep. No one knows of these arrangements except his servant and the hypnotist, and on May 30 the hypnotist leaves town and the servant dies in a fire which destroys West's house and, presumably, West himself.

In September of the year 2000 a Boston physician, Dr. Leete, uncovers a mass of masonry in his garden, finds West, and resuscitates him. *Looking Backward* is West's account of what he finds at the end of the twentieth century. Among the wonders are airplanes, radio, television, paper fabrics for clothing and draperies, electrical heat--all of them unknown in 1887. More important, however, is the peaceful Socialistic society, so much in contrast with that of 1887, which West describes as like a coach to which the masses of humanity are harnessed, while a few ride on top. The climax of the story is a nightmare in which West finds himself back in 1887, tries to tell of what he has seen, and is denounced as an anarchist. Running through the story is the romance of West and Edith Leete, who turns out to be the great-granddaughter of Edith Bartlett... Many pages are devoted to displaying the extensive recreational facilities and the material comforts provided by the nationalized state."

Theodore Hornberger
The Literature of the United States 2, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953,61,66) 797