All utopias are visions of a better world. They also have an underside which is a critique of contemporary society. They are all imaginative musings on the relationship between human nature and social conditions. And they all insist that what is now is not immutable and eternal but open to change, to improvement. One of the functions of the utopian novel is the negation of the existing order through a positive portrayal of an imagined world. All dystopias, on the other hand, envisage a world gone thoroughly wrong, a world of nightmare. Dystopias also offer a critique of contemporary negative depiction. Both are equally normative and both offer powerful indictments of the prevailing order.

The utopian tradition (of which the dystopia is the dark side) has been, until very recently and with one or two notable exceptions, the preserve of male writers. In the last two decades, however, women have begun to write both utopian and dystopian novels. Almost all of these are consciously feminist in their orientation. This course examines some of these works and focuses on the dual perspectives of the utopian tradition as critique of contemporary conditions and as vision of a world as it ought to be or will be.

A series of questions will be posed in the course. Why do women begin writing utopias/dystopias when they do? What are the characteristics of the genre and why would they have become attractive to women writers of the 1960’s through to today? Can we discern a common critique of the existing order, especially with regard to the position of women? In the case of offered solutions to today’s problems - how viable are they and what has been omitted from consideration? Do these works offer prescription for effecting social change and how viable are they? Is the feminist utopian tradition in itself, a force for social change? Finally, is the feminist utopian impulse threatened or reinforced by developments in the area of postmodern theory and practice?

All required readings for the course are feminist novels, either utopian or dystopian - some containing elements of both. Students are encouraged to read as many other novels in this tradition as possible. As well, students will be strongly encouraged to read at least one critical study, to be chosen from a list presented in the first class.

REQUIRED READINGS:
Joanna Russ: The Female Man  
Margie Piercy: Woman On the Edge of Time  
Ursula LeGuin: The Dispossessed  
Monique Wittig: Les Guerilleres  
Margaret Atwood: The Handmaid's Tale  
Starhawk: The Fifth Sacred Thing

RECOMMENDED READINGS:

Several stories by James Liptree Jr. (Alice Sheldon), specified in the first class. At least one critical study of the genre. List to be distributed in the first class.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Participation 10%  
Presentation (5-7 pages) 15%  
Mid-term (in class) 25%  
Final Paper (20-25 pages) 50%

DESIGNATED CREDIT:

Students may apply to the English Department to have this course designated as 3 upper division credits.