Our world is not perfect but there is a remedy. Consistent with this train of thought many visionaries, throughout the ages, have acknowledged the various human frailties that prevent supreme happiness and have proposed ways to correct them in order to better the world we live in. Thus, the notion of ‘utopia’ was born. Going back as far as Plato, who discussed the perfect state in his Republic, humans have employed utopian ideas to deal with the conditions that they face.

Reflecting the optimistic faith of these utopian thinkers, ideal living arrangements and organizations, harmoniously planned for the well being of all, have been repeatedly proposed throughout history. For their creators, these arrangements have been usually viewed as reasonable and realizable. Yet, we find that the attempt to redefine and create new groups, governments, legal systems, and other personal and social forms have so often failed (sometimes cruelly), that the fundamental idea of ‘utopia’ has oftentimes been viewed with skepticism. What was to be, when initially proposed, became tainted with a sense of impossibility, of being unattainable, and of being a dream rather than reality.

Nevertheless, utopian thinking remains with us because it provides a fundamental means by which we seek to give shape and substance to our hopes and desires for human progress.

Indeed, it seems that the concept of utopia represents an irresistible way for people to cope with the miseries and misfortunes facing them. It can seemingly be applied to every personal and social dimension of life from the most micro to the most macro levels. For instance, it can pertain to the highest levels involving societies (or nations) and the world as a whole. Or, it can relate to the dynamics of social groups and institutions within society, i.e., what one may be referred to as the meso or middle levels. And, it can also deal with single human beings and their attempts to deal with their personal problems and, ultimately, survival.

Reflecting the diversity of approaches to the idea of utopia, this special edition contains four essays that examine quite different uses of utopian discourse. This discourse focuses on the national level in regard to the development of a country; a social level dealing with the status and conditions faced by a major group (women) in society; an institutional dimension within society involving the not so always perfect world of academia; and, the personal level where the very existence of an individual is at stake. In addressing these concerns and various dimensions of personal and social life, one finds that utopian discourse and imagery continues to exercise a powerful hold over our thinking, imagination, and behavior.

In “Jeremy Bentham, Utopia, Paradise, and Costa Rica” the author, Dennis Seager, investigates the use of utopia as a significant element in the creation of a new nation state. He examines the role Jeremy Bentham played in the development of Costa Rica as “a New World utilitarian utopia.” Bentham discussed numerous dimensions of his ideal society including accessibility, form of government, as well as the education of the public mind through the reading of books and essays. Interestingly enough, more recent utopian texts critique and reject those works influenced by and written in the utopian spirit.
of Bentham that young Costa Ricans are expected to read. As a new literature replaces the old literature, which presented a particular image of the country, these new works seek to influence Costa Rican society with their alternative view of the social history of this country. The original works that played an important role in the emergence of this nation may eventually be replaced by new, albeit quite different and highly critical, utopian texts.

If the reading of books can improve a nation and give hope to a better future, it can also ameliorate the lives of individuals within a society. This is the main theme of “Utopian Feminism and Feminist Pedagogy: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Everyday Classroom” by Julie Ann Harms Cannon and Adrian De La Rosa. Women’s lives must be improved and this cannot be done without a change in the overall social and economic system. It is not only a need on a personal level; it is a social need. Women must be able to support themselves because equal contributions from women contribute to the dynamic character of society and help make it more productive. It is in a series of fictional, utopian works that the early twentieth century sociologist Charlotte Perkins Gilman enunciates the need for social reform and gender equality. One of the advantages of her choice of this medium is that she can reach a wider audience since “not all had access to ‘scholarly’ material.” She goes beyond a description of women’s unequal status by offering a set of tools for creating a better society. How women can achieve equality as well as how children should be raised are key issues addressed in her utopian literary works. These are the types of topics discussed by the authors of this essay while they, at the same time, argue for and demonstrate the relevance of utopian feminism for pedagogy in the contemporary classroom.

While the needs of students are being attended to in the classroom, this does not, however, mean that the world of faculty in the university setting is perfect. That is why the next essay directs our attention to professional ethics in the workplace. “The Ordeal of Civility in Academe” by Cheryl B. Leggon utilizes the utopian image to analyze and evaluate the professional and social dynamics operating within a social institution. The author compares the academe that often is to the one that should be. Examining the two, the reader (who works in academia) will easily recognize the utopian representation (acadream) in contrast to what is too often the reality (academon). Different dimensions of the faculty/academic experience are examined and compared: basis of community, performance appraisal, research activities, and notions of collegiality and civility. Interestingly enough, we find that each of these dimensions is drastically different depending upon whether the faculty member belongs to an acadream or academon department. For example, in academon the basic insecurities of senior faculty members lead them to exercise strict control over others in their department while in acadream individuals are much more inclined to provide support and encouragement to those they work with. So too, when it comes to fulfilling the requirements for being granted tenure, the expectations placed on junior faculty members who reside in acadream have no similarity to those encountered by those working in academon. Respect and trust or the lack of such qualities are among the key attributes that shape and distinguish these two professional worlds within the institution of higher education.

To go from one world to another should not be an impossible task, as long as the individuals are willing to change and are strong enough to do so. But sometimes people try to preserve a niche they have created for themselves in order to cope with life itself and survive the ordeals they have to face. The use of utopia for maintaining a sense of happiness at the
personal level is the focus of “Utopian Themes in Monika Maron’s Novel *Animal Triste*” by Karin Schestokat. In this fictional novel, the main character creates her own utopian world, a “dream” world that allows her to escape a reality that is perceived as “lacking” and “in need of improvement.” Compelled to create a more satisfying existence, she lives in a “perception” of happiness that is utopian. Her love story has to be unique and perfect. When it seems to be reduced to “bourgeois reality” she must, therefore, terminate it. The narration of her story is in itself a utopian creation in which she becomes prisoner. Incapable of giving a complete account of this story, for fear of being separated from her utopian world, she must always return to the beginning and start anew. It is only when she is capable of narrating it to the end that reality can finally set in and she becomes free.

In conclusion, utopia (which might be described as a place or condition that is not but which is sought after by one or more actors) has and continues to play an important role in our attempts to create an ideal world. Indeed, utopians consider this way of thinking to be essential to the effort to correct the imperfect world we live in. Of course, it may not be the right tool. It may leave individuals in a state of illusion that sooner or later crumbles before their eyes. Nonetheless, it is a conceptual device that offers entire societies, groups, organizations, and individuals, a way to depict and sometimes achieve an alternative to a life they consider flawed. If utopia is an imaginary concept, it is, as previously stated, a means of hope and a principle vehicle by which humans seek to transform what they perceive to be the unsatisfactory and sometimes oppressive conditions of their personal and collective lives. That is why it should be considered to be an essential aspect of human life, the manifestation of which may take many forms. Hopefully, this special issue has contributed to our appreciation of and awareness of how this is the case.