

Controlling the Word - The Language of Dystopia in The Handmaid's Tale and The Chrysalids

A Level student Alicia Smith suggests that the power of language is at the heart of Atwood's and Wyndham's dystopian visions.

The Handmaid's Tale and The Chrysalids

It's no coincidence that the word 'dystopia' is relatively new to the English language. The idea of the dystopia - the 'imaginary society characterised by human misery' - only emerged as a genre in the twentieth century, with such famous examples as Orwell's 1984 and Huxley's Brave New World. It's been suggested that this is at least in part due to the horrific events of that century, during which war, genocide and totalitarian regimes took the lives of millions and led to widespread disillusionment. Dystopian novels reject the idea of social perfection being possible, and often act as warnings of the dangers of certain political stances - for example, the thinly-veiled Communism in 1984 or the religious bigotry in The Handmaid's Tale.

However, politics isn't all there is to dystopian literature, as the current revival of the genre in young adult fiction suggests. Examining two notable dystopian novels - The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood and The Chrysalids by John Wyndham - shows us what could be seen as the genre's central concern: the power of language.

Language and Power

Starting with The Handmaid's Tale, we can see that it certainly is a political novel - specifically, a feminist one. Atwood explicitly states that it

highlighting the 'warning' aspect of her dystopian novel. But in her portrayal of an oppressive society in the near future, the focus is continually on the use of language as a means of power. The government uses Biblical texts as a form of propaganda; for example, Offred recalls how the 'usual stories' were 'drummed into us' and also how the government inserted its own values into these apparently Biblical lessons

Blessed are the silent... I know they made that up.

On a wider scale, the government represses individuality by manipulating language; the Handmaids' names are taken from them and replaced with derivatives of the men they serve - Offred, Ofglen, Ofwarren. The labels of 'Handmaid', 'Wife' and 'Unwoman' also remove any individual identities and define women simply by their roles.

The Chrysalids features a similar use of labels to categorise and oppress minorities; the religious leaders of the Labrador community condemn genetic deviants, such as the protagonist and his friends, as 'Blasphemies', 'Deviations' and 'mutants', all nouns which imply evil abnormality. Religion and religious language is the single most important element of Wyndham's imagined society - the semi-Biblical Definition of Man and sayings such as 'Blessed is the Norm' act as a constant backdrop to the protagonist's life and the novel itself, while other concepts are named along similar religious lines, such as 'Tribulation' and 'Purity'. This all suggests that the leaders' power is maintained by controlling how people perceive the world through language.

Rebelling through Language

But power in these two novels is not exclusive to the oppressive governments. Dystopian fiction usually focuses on, or at least, includes resistance to oppression, and in The Handmaid's Tale and The Chrysalids the strength of the ruling elite means that real political or violent resistance is impossible - so the oppressed minorities rebel primarily through language. In The Chrysalids, protagonist David and his friends' act of resistance to the 'Norm' is telepathy - a new kind of language undetectable by their oppressors, which enables them to question the accepted worldview by sharing their knowledge and minds more closely than others can with 'inadequate words'. The value of words, in particular those of the oppressors, is also called into question by the character of Uncle Axel: he refers to the word 'Tribulation' as 'a rusted mirror, signifying nothing' and dismisses talk of losing faith as 'preacher-words'. A similar narrative role in The Handmaid's Tale is filled by Moira, who is portrayed as the most rebellious woman in the novel and in several places is shown using language to defy the power of Gilead; for example, she changes the lyrics of 'There is a Balm in Gilead' to 'There is a Bomb', ridiculing the regime's propaganda. The fact that she is always referred to as Moira - never by any of the derivative names which other women in the novel receive - suggests that she keeps an individual identity, resisting all attempts to erase it.

Controlling the Word

Offred, the protagonist of The Handmaid's Tale, is less openly rebellious than Moira, but arguably this means she uses language as a means of resistance more - there is no other safe outlet for her anger. Wordplay is a striking feature of Offred's narration

Household... to have and to hold... the hold of a ship. Hollow.

This is significant when contrasted with the lack of self-expression women are intended to display in Gilead, as Offred's vivid and multi-layered narrative defies the regime's insistence that 'Blessed are the silent'. Critic Felicity Currie says that 'Offred controls patriarchy's most powerful weapon: the WORD', and indeed Offred keeps herself sane under oppression by secretly reading, writing and speaking - dwelling on the forbidden message written on her bedroom floor, the cushions stitched with the names of virtues and her clandestine conversations with fellow Handmaid Ofglen. Her Scrabble games with the Commander are portrayed as dangerously subversive acts of political and sexual deviance. Taking the novel as a whole, Offred's most basic resistance is the act of telling her story, which we discover has been recorded for distribution throughout the country.

Violence - Real and Linguistic

Of course, it's obvious that language is not the only means of obtaining or wielding power in either novel. Like most real dictatorships, the governments of Labrador and Gilead use terror and brutality to

oppress minorities and maintain control; in *The Handmaid's Tale*, armed soldiers - 'Guardians' and 'Angels' - are ever-present, preventing active rebellion, and Offred's paranoia about Nick - 'Perhaps he is an Eye' - reflects the terror of the regime's secret police. In *The Chrysalids*, violence is the automatic reaction to anything deviant and the novel is permeated by the protagonists' tension over their possible discovery, expressed in particular by David's recurring dream of his father sacrificing a deviation - first a calf, then his friend Sophie, and finally his telepathically-gifted sister Petra. The violence of the regime comes to a climax near the end of the novel where hundreds of men are mobilised to track down and kill the telepaths and other mutants. However, while acknowledging that Atwood and Wyndham accurately portray the use of terror as power by dictatorships, we can note that this power is bound up with, and justified by, the use of language. The semi-Biblical names of the soldiers and police in Gilead give them the aura of divine approval and power; in *Labrador*, the religious rhetoric of David's father similarly justifies violence against the oppressed minority by declaring them less than human.

So in conclusion, it's reasonable to say that in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Chrysalids* at least, language and its use or abuse is an important theme and concern. Considering that many, if not most, dystopian novels deal with oppressive governments of one sort or another, this is perhaps not surprising - oppressive rulers tend to suppress individual identity, and language is hugely important to individual self-expression. The message of these two novels - and perhaps the dystopian genre as a whole - seems to be that how we speak determines how we live, and so determines who we are.

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