

Ordinary, Average, Cowardly? The Everyman Archetype in 1984, Fahrenheit 451, The Handmaid's Tale

Mark Roberts views the main protagonists of four iconic dystopias through the lens of the Everyman (or woman) archetype, showing how their very ordinariness, as opposed to heroism, is a vital component in our interest in their plight.

Etymologically, archetype comes from the Greek *arkhe*, meaning primitive, and *typos*, meaning model or stamp. It is often confused with stereotype, the original printing plate from which ensuing imprints were made, and is now used metaphorically for generalisations of a particular type of person or thing. Archetypes, therefore, shouldn't be seen as clichéd characters used by lazy writers. Instead, according to psychologist Carl Jung, archetypes are used unconsciously, allowing us to recognise fresh and fluid variations of familiar characters.

One such stock character familiar to readers of dystopian fiction – consciously or not – is the Everyman archetype. Not necessarily the protagonist, the Everyman fulfils the role of reader substitute; like us, they are a regular guy (or 'gal' in the case of the Everywoman) placed in an extraordinary situation. Writers of dystopian texts, who plunge us into imagined worlds, are particularly attracted to Everyman archetypes, as they root us in reality and give us a flawed figure, very much like ourselves, to identify with. Unlike the noble hero, the Everyman is out of his depth. He is unconcerned with saving the world or working for the common good. Instead, the Everyman is motivated by self-preservation.

Winston Smith – Nineteen Eighty-Four

The classic dystopian Everyman is George Orwell's Winston Smith from Nineteen Eighty-Four. Smith's averageness is signalled by his commonplace surname. In sharp contrast to his namesake Winston Churchill, the wretched protagonist inspires feelings of pity and pathos, not patriotism and pride. Winston's physical inadequacy is apparent from the opening:

Winston, who was thirty-nine and had a varicose ulcer above his right ankle, went slowly, resting several times on the way.

Orwell bestows further humiliation upon his shambolic protagonist during compulsory exercise when 6079 Smith W has to make 'a violent lunge' to succeed 'in touching his toes with knees unbent'. Despite his early rebellious actions, Winston's survival instinct takes over. The third-person limited perspective voices Winston's distinctly unheroic fear:

In the face of pain there are no heroes, no heroes, he thought over and over.

Reflecting the blow from the guard, the repetition of 'no heroes, no heroes' hammers home Winston's weakness in front of a more powerful enemy.

While Orwell commented in a 1946 book review that:

it is an unusual novel that does not contain [...] a portrait of the author, thinly disguised as hero, saint, or martyr.

In Nineteen Eighty-Four, we perhaps see the author as flawed Everyman.

Applying Orwell's dictum to Nineteen Eighty-Four prompts a fascinating question: do any of these three categories fit the author's 'thin disguise' of Winston Smith? Not the hero – Smith capitulates to betray Julia:

'Tear her face off, strip her to the bones. Not me! Julia! Not me!'

Saint? Orwell's description of hideous torture might be expected in a mediaeval hagiography but jars when juxtaposed with Winston's grim visit to a prole prostitute and fantasies of wife killing. A martyr then? Well, Winston is no straightforward martyr. Inconveniently, he fails to die for his cause. And he gives a supine repudiation of his beliefs. Yet dystopian texts are indeed 'unusual novels'. While Orwell may have wished to see himself as an ordinary guy hero, the conventions of dystopian fiction prevent him from realising this aim. Dystopian Everyman figures are forgiven by their readers because their nightmarish circumstances are so extraordinary that they are, to quote Othello, left 'perplex'd in the extreme'. As Gordon Bowker explains in his biography of Orwell, with the author's health making the novel's completion a race against time:

Nineteen Eighty-Four had been written against death.

The pessimistic treatment of his doleful Everyman is indicative of a writer unwilling to allow his stand-in to come to an optimistic end, precisely because he knew his own imminent demise would be unpleasant.

Guy Montag – Fahrenheit 451

An Everyman archetype often compared to Winston Smith is Guy Montag from Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451. At the beginning of the novel, Montag – with his pious penchant for book-burning – appears to be not just unheroic, but actively villainous:

Guy Montag grinned the fierce grin of all men singed and driven back by flame [...] Later, going to sleep, he would feel the fiery smile still gripped by his face muscles, in the dark. It never went away, that smile.

The reader soon recognises that Montag's 'smile' is fixed, like his brain, through ideological manipulation. Montag, like Smith, has been indoctrinated by the anti-intellectual totalitarian state that employs him. In contrast to Smith, Montag is a more dynamic character who undergoes an epiphany:

Montag had done nothing. His hand had done it all, his hand, with a brain of its own, with a conscience and a curiosity in each trembling finger, had turned thief [...] Now, it plunged the book back under his arm, pressed it tight to sweating armpit...

The synecdoche 'hand' symbolises Montag's residual free thought. Stealing the book is an instinctive gesture, an ordinary theft that – combined with an elderly woman's refusal to give up her books and subsequent gesture of self-immolation – reframes the zealous, apparently antagonistic pyromaniac as a defiantly average Everyman.

Bradbury also signals his protagonist's regular guy status through naming. He is literally a regular 'Guy'. There are also parallels with Guy Fawkes, who shares Montag's appetite for destruction and rebellion against a repressive state. 'Montag' is German for 'Monday', a day of the week that has mundane connotations of 'everyday' life, yet also implies Nazi book-burning. Unlike Smith, Montag escapes the clutches of the regime; his clumsy insubordination ultimately rewarded with a happy ending by his contrastingly hopeful author.

The Father – The Road

Books are also burnt in *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. John Carey has written that:

to count as a utopia, an imaginary place must be an expression of desire. To count as a dystopia, an imaginary place must be an expression of fear.

In this quintessential post-apocalyptic 'expression of fear' books are merely fuel, incinerated without ceremony. The father's Everyman categorisation is revealed in this case by his absence of a name: he is both anonymous and universal. Ruthlessly pragmatic, 'the man' sacrifices his virtue and himself so that his son may live. In this bleak post-apocalyptic environment, the Everyman father's understandable return to savagery cannot be tempered by the civilising influence of the innocent child. The ordinary guy's courage is measured merely by a willingness to exist:

What's the bravest thing you ever did? He spat in the road a bloody phlegm. Getting up this morning, he said.

Phlegmatic indeed.

The Road's Everyman figure is unable to deal with the fallout of the past and is reluctant to look ahead. Instead, the archetypal innocent child offers the reader hope for the future, which explains McCarthy's decision to kill off the flawed father figure. Before doing so, the writer allows the metaphorical baton of responsibility to pass from the traumatised and weak Everyman to the symbol of renewal that is the boy:

He was just hungry, Papa. He's going to die.

He's going to die anyway.

He's so scared, Papa.

The man squatted and looked at him. I'm scared, he said. Do you understand? I'm scared.

The boy didn't answer. He just sat there with his head down, sobbing.

You're not the one who has to worry about everything.

The boy said something but he couldn't understand him. What? He said.

He looked up, his wet and grimy face. Yes I am, he said. I am the one.

Offred – The Handmaid's Tale

Unlike the third-person limited narrators of our first three dystopias, The Handmaid's Tale sees Margaret Atwood use a first-person narrator as her 'ordinary gal' protagonist. Atwood explains this decision by alluding to her Everywoman characteristics:

The voice is that of an ordinary, more-or-less cowardly woman (rather than heroine), because I suppose I'm more interested in social history than in the biographies of the outstanding.

On the surface, 'cowardly' appears harsh to the reader, who fully recognises the patriarchal, theocratic chains that bind Offred to her submissive role. After all, even Offred's artificial name is patronymic: she is owned by a man ('of Fred'). The name also has echoes of 'offered', suggesting the enforced ritual of the ceremony. Upon further inspection, however, Atwood's 'coward' label does, arguably, ring true; unlike the truly heroic Moira, Offred eschews opportunities for courageous sedition in order to enjoy the lesser subversion of illicit games of Scrabble with the Commander and sex with Nick.

As we've seen, dystopian protagonists – like the average reader – are incapable of 'outstanding' heroism. Indeed, Offred is only slightly 'off red' (i.e. dissents somewhat feebly against the brainwashing of the Red Centre). Interestingly, Jamie Dopp notes an inextricable link between

Atwood's employment of the first-person plural pronoun 'we', Offred's Everywoman status and our own fallibility as readers:

the Handmaid seems to speak for all women [...] statements in the plural 'we' [...] have the effect of creating an identification: you, reader, woman, are like me: abject. 'We yearned for the future' [and] 'We lived, as usual, by ignoring'. The implication is that all women share the characteristics of the handmaid, an impression ironically strengthened by the fact that, in her very namelessness, the handmaid takes on the guise of an Everywoman.

Some feminist critics have accused Offred of being complicit in her own imprisonment. This is missing Atwood's point. In an extraordinary world, an extraordinary protagonist would fail to maintain our interest. After all, the perverse joy of the genre is in seeing how people like us struggle in atrocious situations.

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