

# Two Different Kinds of Dystopia - The Handmaid's Tale and 1984

A Level student Grace O'Duffy compares the way two iconic dystopias create equally disturbing but different visions of future worlds.

*Never again will you be capable of love, or friendship, or joy of living, or laughter, or curiosity, or courage, or integrity. You will be hollow. We shall squeeze you empty and then we shall fill you with ourselves.*

*Nineteen Eighty-Four*

The backdrops of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* are startling dystopian worlds which envision a very disturbing future indeed. The two novels are made unsettling in very different ways, and yet they both display features that are typical of the dystopian genre. Totalitarianism and the theft of freedom snake through both Oceania in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*, with gender-based discrimination being taken to the extreme in the latter and horrifying indoctrination earning the former its infamy as one of the most effective dystopian works ever written.

## Remoulding Minds

Of course, brainwashing is a significant element in *The Handmaid's Tale* as well. The 'Aunts' drill their conservative Christian views into the Handmaids to the extent that they begin to believe the blame for rape should fall on the shoulders of the victim. They are discouraged from free thought as far as possible - 'Like all other things now, thought must be rationed', but Atwood's characters never go as far as Orwell's to manipulate the mind. Brainwashing in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* borders on the downright terrifying, most notably in the infamous Room 101, where Party member O'Brien reveals that they never simply kill the disobedient; they 'correct' wandering thoughts first.

*We make the brain perfect before we blow it out.*

Orwell's dystopia is so disturbing because Winston is the only character we see with any true memory of history, and of right and wrong in the moral sense, yet we see the Party

*burn all evil and illusion out of him.*

If the mind can be so easily remoulded, then how can anyone in Oceania be sure that what they know is really what they know, or whether someone else has etched it on to their mind? The thought of such a world is genuinely chilling.

## A Grip on Childhood and Language

Furthermore, a reality where your own children would betray you out of sheer obedience to the government would surely be the greatest fear of many. The Party can destroy childhood with its propaganda and indoctrinate emotionless values into the innocent, and this is a truly disturbing aspect of the novel. It is made all the more disturbing as these young Spies are horribly reminiscent of the Hitler Youth, which had been going strong just a few years before the publication of Orwell's novel. The iron grip of the Party is further demonstrated by the official language of Oceania, 'Newspeak' - 'the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year'. This means that rebellion will eventually become impossible in Oceania, as there will be no words in human knowledge capable of forming any anti-Party thought:

*In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it.*

Anyone who is not indoctrinated with unwavering love for the Party will not be capable of giving any thought to it. While the characters in *The Handmaid's Tale*, have little hope to dwell on, they are at least able to dwell on it.

## A Narrator who doesn't Know it all

A common trait of the novels is that neither author makes use of an entirely omniscient narrator; we only know what happens when the central characters do (Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* and Winston in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*). This underlines the unpredictability of the dystopian world, and amplifies the terror of living under totalitarian regimes. However, Atwood and Orwell do employ different types of narrators to varying effects. Atwood's choice of first-person narrator means Offred is less estranged from us, becoming less of a character and more of a real person than *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s Winston. Winston is slightly more distanced from us by Orwell's choice of the third-person limited omniscient narrator. However, it could be said that Orwell's choice of narrator solidifies the events of his novel as the narrator sticks very firmly to Winston's point of view, and so we get the benefit of his thought without doubting his actions. Offred, on the other hand, can sometimes be unreliable - can we be sure that she always tells the truth?

## Orwell's Detached Style

Orwell's bleak, almost matter-of-fact storytelling contributes to a dystopia that is absolute in its despair. Winston seems resigned to the world in which he resides and it affects the languages he uses, detaching emotion from thought, for example when he contemplates murder:

*The piece of glass in his pocket would be heavy enough for the job.*

Even the lack of punctuation here adds to the bluntness of Winston's deliberations.

## Atwood's 'Feminine' Style

The Handmaid's Tale contrasts notably with Nineteen Eighty-Four's menacing language. The latter makes no pretence about being a dystopia, with its ashen skies and intimidating propaganda posters; whereas the sunny and softly described Gilead seems quite pleasant from a purely aesthetic perspective. Furthermore, Offred's stream of consciousness often strays into *écriture féminine*; she describes herself as

*a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping.*

Focusing on vague, symbolic emotions cloaks some of the truth of what goes on in Gilead, and some might say that we never even see the extent of the horrors of what goes on there, because Offred tries her best not to give it too much thought. This is quite disturbing as it shows that dystopias can be disguised, which is markedly different from Orwell's unyielding approach in conveying the hostile Oceania.

## Based on Reality

The real terror of both Nineteen Eighty-Four and The Handmaid's Tale lies in the fact that they are in some ways based on real events of the past and present. This makes the possibility of these dystopian worlds becoming reality seem plausible: though Oceania and Gilead may seem very extreme, they cannot easily be ridiculed. Everything that happens in The Handmaid's Tale has occurred in some way in the past, and it takes place in the future, even now. Therefore there is an element of fear as the reader asks - if this has happened before, and human nature never really changes, then might this really become reality? Some of the values in The Handmaid's Tale are, startlingly, held by some in the modern Western world. Atwood mocks the conservative views of America's 'Bible Belt', but it could be more of a warning than a satire. Her dystopia is also rendered more of a plausible future by its genesis: environmental and nuclear problems, that we are faced by today. If this is Atwood's prediction for the future, then it is disturbingly hard to dispute.

If Nineteen Eighty-Four was, similarly, Orwell's personal prediction of the future, that it has arguably lost some of its effect: the year 1984 has been and gone and Orwell's vision has not been realised. Even at the time of its publication, some were unconvinced by its credibility. Literary critic Harold Nicolson commented:

*Such inconsistencies of detail prevent our surrendering ourselves wholly to Mr. Orwell's thesis: but it is an excellent thesis none the less.*

Many, however, regarded it as a genuinely alarming 'political prophecy' with the recent dictatorship of Germany still fresh in readers' minds, and Stalin's ongoing grip of the USSR. Now that it can no longer be true, Nineteen Eighty-Four's impact is perhaps blunted, but I would say that it remains nonetheless powerful. The fact that this novel once seemed like a possible future speaks volumes about the state of the world when Orwell wrote it, and while 'telescreens' are absent from the modern day, and there is no network of intimidating Ministries, some aspects of Oceania are now a part of everyday life. Phone conversations can be listened to and recorded by the government, CCTV is rife and the

advance of technology might be restricting our language. Is 'text speak' just a more subtle form of 'Newspeak'?

## Two Different Approaches

The Handmaid's Tale and Nineteen Eighty-Four are both seminal works of dystopian fiction, achieved by very different approaches from Atwood and Orwell. While both novels share many classic elements that can be found throughout the history of dystopian literature, the fascinating thing about them is how they differ. The verisimilitude of The Handmaid's Tale is what makes it such a hellish place, as it forces the reader to reflect on the similarities between reality and Atwood's creation. Nineteen Eighty-Four bears a frightening resemblance to regimes and attitudes we know have existed, with the Party's ability to warp minds making the novel a truly disturbing read. The vague uncertainty with which Atwood writes rivals Orwell's frankness, and the fact that such different depictions can be so equally compelling illustrates the vast bank of fears that cement dystopian fiction as such an enduring genre.

## Bibliography

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This article first appeared in emagazine 65, September 2014.

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