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Characteristics of the Dystopian Novel: *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale*

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and George Orwell's *1984* are novels that should both be considered for the Barnes & Noble's doctoral program on dystopian literature. Both narratives explore the dysfunction in the societies that their protagonists live in and are therefore able to critique these environments through exploring the traditional characteristics of the dystopian genre. These characteristics are of course the deprivation of individuality, the use of sex as a tool and the inability for protagonists to redeem the worlds that they live in, making them tragic characters. **1984 and The Handmaid's Tale share these tactics, all in the purpose of establishing dehumanized societies that exploit each character's inescapable suffering in their respected narratives.**

The deprivation of individuality for dystopian characters is shown first hand in *1984* when Winston (the protagonist) is psychologically tortured with rats. The Narrator writes, "The mask was closing in on his face. The wire brushed his cheek... But he had suddenly understood that in the whole world there was just *one* person to whom he could transfer his punishment- *one* body that he could thrust between himself and the rats." (Orwell, 286). This "one body" that Winston is thinking about is of course Julia, his love interest throughout the novel. However, it is important to question why O'Brien (a party representative) wanted Winston to scapegoat the love of his life instead of facing the rats himself. The answer to this question is simple yet the reasoning behind it is brilliant: The government in Orwell's book wants Winston's undisputed loyalty. By getting Winston to turn on Julia, the party is able to break him and his beliefs. You

see, the party will never just kill rebels because that still grants them with a sense of inner pride, like dying for what you believe in. If the party can brainwash their citizens though and if they can enforce their own ideological concepts into their minds, then there is no defects in the party's hierarchical power. Winston is simply beaten until he conforms to the party, leaving no inspired copy cats behind; the system is bullet proof due to its ability to suck the life out of its people.

This concept of deprivation is further exemplified in *The Handmaid's Tale* when Offred (the protagonist) expresses her desire for touch and conversation. She discusses her former hatred of small talk and her need for touch, writing, "How I used to despise such talk. Now I long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange of sorts... Or I would help Rita make the bread, sinking my hands into that soft resistant warmth which is so much like flesh. I hunger to touch something." (Atwood, 11). When exploring this passage, it is important to understand why Offred is craving these simplistic entities. You see, along her path of being dehumanized she has had everything taken from her, including the basic aspects of human nature. Conversation and touch can be real intimate for a human being, as well as assisting in the enhancement of one's maturity. To have these joys stripped is also having one's individuality revoked. Offred's "hunger to touch" further proves that these pleasures have in fact been stripped from her, especially when she is trying to replace human flesh with bread dough. Similarly to *1984*, Atwood's tale is repulsed by touch and conversation because they evoke passion, as they did for Winston and Julia. The objective behind this restraint is simple: when passion is erased, so is thought. When there is no thought, there is no rebellion. When there is no rebellion, there is no threat. When there is no threat, power is stabilized.

This stabilization of power can be further looked at through the use of sex in both of these narratives. In *1984*, the Narrator discusses the government's views on sex, writing:

What was more important was that sexual privation induced hysteria, which was desirable because it could be transformed into war fever and leadership worship... The way she put it was: ... 'All this marching up and down and cheering and waving flags is simply sex gone sour. If you're happy inside yourself, why should you get excited about Big Brother and the Three-Year- Plans and the Two Minutes Hate and all the rest of their bloody rot?' (Orwell, 133).

The use of the word "hysteria" is interesting in this passage, especially in its relation to "transformation". Because sex is only supposed to be used for reproduction, the government is able to take advantage of the biological desires of its citizens because "hysteria" literally represents the madness that evolves within Oceanic (the name of the world's) individuals. "Transformation" also indicates that the government uses this built up anger and redirects it towards subjects that they dislike, such as "traitors" and countries that they are currently at war with. When questioning why the government would do such a thing, Julia says it best when she makes her comments regarding excitement. When she refers to the marching and parades as "sex gone sour", she is inferring that sex is like a high that people achieve after performing the act. By having sex, people are granted a certain array of emotions that make them feel good and satisfied. If people are granted the privileges of having sex, this extreme sense of patriotism would be erased because there is no built up frustration. In other words, the government would not be able to forcefully install this sense of hyperbolic pride in Oceania. So to answer simply why the government would want to control sex, it is because sex evokes individuality (which we

have already discussed) which of course includes thinking clearly. If people are thinking clearly, then it is much more difficult to control them. If it is much more difficult to control them, then power is destabilized.

Sex in terms of power can be further examined through the *The Handmaid's Tale* as well. When Offred describes her sexual duties with her commander, she writes:

My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking... I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved... It has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with... Arousal and orgasm are no longer thought necessary; they would be a symptom of frivolity merely like jazz garters or beauty spots... Outdated. It seems odd that women once spent such time and energy reading about such things... They are so obviously recreational. This is not recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. (Atwood, 94-95).

When looking at this passage, it is important to understand why Offred believes that her and the Commander are not making love. This is supposed to suggest that sex is no longer sex. This is proven when she uses the word "fucking," which exemplifies that this is in fact an act or a duty expected of herself and the Commander (which she says later in the passage). She further supports this claim by stating that the act has nothing to do with "romance" or any other intimate concept, which then devalues the concept of sex all together. This is shown by her use of the word "outdated" which she defines arousal and orgasm as. It is also interesting that she compares these sexual responses of intercourse to "jazz garters" and "beauty spots" because it suggests that

sex used to be looked at as an art form or simply as beautiful. Her use of the word “odd” also reveals that The Republic of Gilead (the government in novel) has in fact began to brainwash her because she no longer views sex as recreational, but as a form of business which of course further minimizes its original authenticity. So compared to *1984*, the narrative shifts sex into a job that strips women of their identity, being nothing more than the genitals that they possess; this of course strengthens the Republic of Gilead’s power, ensuring that there authority remains stable.

While the use of sex and the deprivation of individuality are of course important in this specific genre, the protagonist’s inability to redeem justice for their society is the most substantial aspect to be considered when thinking about dystopian literature. This is shown first hand in *1984* at the novel’s conclusion. When describing Winston’s newfound perspective on Big Brother, the Narrator writes, “He gazed up at the enormous face. Forty years it had taken him to learn what kind of smile was hidden beneath the dark mustache... But it was alright, everything was alright, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother.” (Orwell, 297-298). The “smile” that Winston learns to appreciate symbolizes this newfound perspective on life that was installed into him. He sees the smile because he now believes that Big Brother represents all that is good. Because of Winston’s new mindset, the tone of the point of view changes as well; this is proven when the Narrator claims that Winston won the victory over himself. This “victory” is Winston accepting his role in society and now idolizing the idea that he once hated: Big Brother. By no longer being a rebel and by also being brainwashed, Winston is proud that the rebellious aspects of his life are over and that he can now embark on his new journey. We, the readers of course have a different perspective and are able

to see how tragically he has fallen, becoming the puppet that he has always dreaded. So to put it simply, this final scene truly reveals that Winston's ambition failed him because his acts of bravery were conducted too late. The party was already too powerful and they proved that one man cannot take down an entire army. In fact, all it took them was a cage full of rats to do so.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's conclusion also shows that she has no ability to save herself or the world around her. This is confirmed when she is about to be taken away and is unsure if she is being saved or killed. She writes:

The van waits in the driveway, its double doors stand open. The two of them, one on either side now, take me by the elbows to help me in. Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing. I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light. (Atwood, 295)

This passage is significant for many reasons. First, the two men on each side symbolize what her life has become. She is no longer a lady, let alone a person, but a slave of this hierarchical system. Offred even acknowledges this when she says that she has given herself to strangers. The use of the word "strangers" is also significant because it further proves the dysfunction that this narrative intertwines itself with, especially in regards to its relationship with the word "it". When reading this novel, it is extremely important to understand who and what Offred is referring to when she says, "it can't be helped". What "it" is supposed to stand for is simply the society that she lives in. Her intention with the entirety of that sentence is to suggest that she complies with the demands of these "strangers" because there is nothing else that she can do. Similarly to *1984*, The Republic of Gilead has gotten too powerful and it cannot be

stopped. They have taken full control and that is why this passage is so important: it represents this book in a nutshell. When Offred says that she is either stepping into darkness or light, it is because her life is truly unknowing. Like Winston, she has lost total control because her society has been nothing but bystanders in this big grand scheme. There is no way to fight, nor is there anyway to redeem. As a character in both narratives, you have two choices: to live with how things are or to kill yourself. Perhaps the ultimate question at this point is to consider what the better option is: “life” or death.

When reading these novels, it is important to understand what lessons Orwell and Atwood are trying to teach their readers. Although there may be many theoretical concepts to take away from both narratives, the most important idea to learn revolves around independence. Liberation belongs to the people and it always will, no matter how imperfect the people may be. When liberation is traded in, the dehumanization of individuals is an inevitable end that will always be suffered. Having said that, it is crucial to understand that dystopian novels expose the dysfunction that is a consequence to extremist behavior. The world is full of scary people, including terrorists, dictators and tons of hateful groups that hope to exterminate those who do not conform to their beliefs. In the US alone, there has been several hate crimes just in the last year. That is why it is important to include books like *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale* in this doctoral program. Students need to be exposed to extremist behavior so they can learn when leadership blurs itself with dictatorship and that starts with learning the characteristics of the genre. When the characteristics are fully learned and understood, we give our world not only a better future but a more accepting present to live in. *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale* both build narratives that exemplify dehumanized societies and because of each character's inescapable

suffering, students should be required to read these works as part of the Barnes & Noble's doctoral program on dystopian literature.

Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Anchor Books.

Orwell, George. 1984. Signet Classics, 1977.