

## Comparative analysis of psychological impacts resulting from life under totalitarian rule in 'Nineteen Eighty-Four' and the 'The Handmaid's Tale'

Dystopia allows for speculative explorations of humanity pushed to its limits. It has been a popular basis for creativity and offers extensive opportunities for theoretical writing with underlying political commentary. Orwell's 'Nineteen Eighty-Four' (referenced as '1984') and Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale' are prime exemplars of dystopian literature, both portraying an elaborate spiral from rebellion into compliance. The fundamentals of total State control are summarised within 1984 - "Power is inflicting pain and humiliation. Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing"<sup>1</sup>. It is suggested that complete control is the defining factor of totalitarianism, and is therefore implicit of a singular scenario for an outcome. However, the two novels discussed in this piece contradict the suggestion as they offer varying, intricate narratives on the decline of individualism. Despite living in broadly similar circumstances, the two individual characters of focus, Winston (1984) and Offred (The Handmaid's Tale), suffer very different experiences at the hands of their government and largely respond in different ways. However, there is a deeper level to their emotional capabilities and responses that lays bare humanity at its core - the characters often mirror each other in times of crisis and represent the key factors of humanity that cannot be removed, no matter the circumstances.

There are significant societal differences between the novels and varying thematic focal points. This affects the worlds that have been constructed under the same concept of complete governmental control, and therefore affects the authors' explorations of the character's sufferings in different ways. 'Nineteen Eighty-Four' fabricates a totalitarian government without exception. Absolute control is the only goal of the Party, With O'Brien, a member of the Inner Party, claiming "We control life, Winston, at all it's levels."<sup>2</sup> As a result, themes relative to group variation (culture, race and gender) are not addressed. Orwell solely focuses on the presence of individuality or the lack thereof - "Humanity is the Party. The others are outside - irrelevant."<sup>3</sup> Winston is an Outer Party member of Airstrip One (comparative to the middle class) and works in the ironically named Ministry of Truth, continuously rectifying articles and literature to align history with the Party's claims. He is expendable, a fact which he is reminded of by the Party's tendency to "vaporise"<sup>4</sup> anyone who does not completely conform and erase them from history.

With 'The Handmaid's Tale', Atwood doesn't focus on total control, but rather conditional control based on gender. The population of Gilead experiences differing constrictions and there is more focus on lifestyle comparisons. In '1984', the entire population is under the same surveillance and they all have to follow the same rules as directed by a small, high tier group of government officials who never interact with them. In Gilead, power also pools

<sup>1</sup> 'Nineteen Eighty-Four', Orwell, pg 306

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. pg 308

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. pg 309

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. pg 22

in segments of the population and there is interaction between those with power and those without. Rather than using a binary system of power distribution like that of *Airstrip One*, Atwood creates individual spheres of authority within society, and explores the circumstantial exchanges of power. Hierarchies in households are explored with occasional inference of the State in the form of Guardians, rather than continuous monitoring in a black and white division of society. The core values of Gilead differ greatly to *Airstrip One* due to the cultural importance of reproduction. The rapidly declining birth rate<sup>5</sup> means women with the ability to reproduce are highly valued but are still deprived of many of their rights, creating a complex balance of self-worth for Offred. She is a Handmaid, therefore her role in society is determined by her fertility. Although she suffers a loss of individuality in categorisation, Offred also has a paradoxical level of importance placed on her due to her childbearing abilities.

Both characters serve their respective State but Winston does not have value in the same way as Offred, creating variation in what is required of them as individuals. However, if either character fails to meet the standards set by their Government they face removal from society. Winston can be vaporised for any action that implies resentment towards Big Brother. Offred is not constantly monitored - although any observed sign of rebellion could lead to her demise, "It occurs to me that she may be a spy, a plant, set to trap me; such is the soil in which we grow"<sup>6</sup> - but risks being punished for factors entirely out of her control. If Offred fails to reproduce for her assigned family after a period of time, she is shipped off to work in the Colonies - areas of the country contaminated with pollution and radioactivity - "You want a baby, don't you?"

'Yes,' I say. It's true, and I don't ask why, because I know. *Give me children, or else I die.* There's more than one meaning to it."<sup>7</sup> As a result, both Offred and Winston are forced to adapt to living in a state of constant fear and coping with the trauma they experience, whilst surviving in different universes with a combination of comparative and contrasting struggles.

Due to situational differences both within the novel and in real life, the authors offer explorations into different levels of trauma and utilise it for character development. Both Winston and Offred suffer trauma, but deal with it differently. Offred is separated from her family when trying to flee the new regime. This trauma occurs before the events of the novel take place and is explored through the use of flashbacks during interludes. They often occur when Offred is left alone to her thoughts; for example, when sitting in the living room, she slips into a flashback - "Serena lights another cigarette, I get into the car. It's a Saturday morning, it's a September, we still have a car..."<sup>8</sup> The trauma it uproots indicates she tries to avoid them - "I sit up, on the rug, wipe my wet face with my sleeve. Of all the dreams this is the worst"<sup>9</sup> These flashbacks gives the reader context, and the fragmented

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<sup>5</sup> 'The Handmaid's Tale' - Historical Notes, Atwood, pg 316

<sup>6</sup> 'The Handmaid's Tale', Atwood, pg 178

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. pg 71

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. pg 94

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. pg 85

distribution of real time events and those that pre-date the narrative also suggests instability. This reinforces the idea that Offred is struggling to cope, and the reader experiences the flashbacks with a real-time correlation to her. The jarring, unnatural jumps back and forth within the narrative is the battle between Offred and her suppressed memories, and so the trauma further reiterates her struggle with her new life.

Winston deals with different types of trauma throughout the novel, and Orwell offers extensive evidence of the impact of traumatic events on his life in differing situational circumstances. Living under the watch of Big Brother has notable detrimental impacts on Winston's general mental stability and he loses elements of his humanity. To prevent immediate deterioration of his mental state, a hypothetical result of exposure to consistent threats of death, Winston largely disconnects from his emotions. Orwell uses a carefully chosen writing style reminiscent of cling film over Winston's emotions, which develops the overall narrative structure to successfully portray the trauma. The audience is able to witness Winston's responses to stimuli and conflict, but is unable to make a proper connection with what he is feeling. "The flat was seven flights up, and Winston, who was thirty-nine and had a varicose ulcer above his right ankle, went slowly, resting several times on the way."<sup>10</sup> It is implied that Winston is feeling pain, but there is no explicit declaration of feeling. The dialogue is observational - there is often acknowledgement of the existence of an emotion, but the correlation with its impact on Winston's body and mind is lacking. It creates a sense of unease, especially when Winston describes traumatic scenarios with no emotional input - "There was a roar that seemed to make the pavement heave; a shower of light objects pattered onto his back. When he stood up he found that he was covered with fragments of glass from the nearest window. He walked on."<sup>11</sup> Orwell retains elements of humanity in Winston, leaving enough descriptive details to prevent the reader from feeling estranged from him - when discussing the death of his mother he addresses the loss he feels, but states it "had been tragic and sorrowful in a way that was no longer possible."<sup>12</sup> He further acknowledges the disconnection, musing "Today there were fear, hatred and pain, but no dignity of emotion, no deep and complex sorrows."<sup>13</sup> Winston's disconnective tendencies have similarities with Offred's who, throughout the novel, follows the concept "One detaches oneself. One describes."<sup>14</sup>

Both characters experience the need for suppression in their life under totalitarian rule - Winston with his mother's death and Offred with her family being taken away. Furthermore, due to the constant threat of removal from society, both Offred and Winston have to adopt disconnective tendencies to manage their lives. Offred seems to struggle with her emotions, which remain a prominent feature in her life. Winston doesn't experience this issue, and it can be argued that the Government of Airstrip One actually has an active role in maintaining Winston's disconnection as it is in their best interest to

<sup>10</sup> "Nineteen Eighty-Four", Orwell, pg 3

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. pg 97

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. pg 35

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. pg 35

<sup>14</sup> 'The Handmaid's Tale', Atwood, pg 106

keep him compliant. The governing body of Gilead focuses more on maintaining order, whilst Big Brother fixates on controlling the minds of the people. This is succinctly analysed by Emmanuel Goldstein, the sole enemy of the State, that "The two aims of the Party are to conquer the whole surface of the earth and to extinguish once and for all the possibility of independent thought."<sup>15</sup> It can then be assumed that Winston struggles less with keeping pain at bay, as he's manipulated into doing so by the Government, who eliminate any elements of a person's individuality.

Although self preservation techniques allow the characters to maintain their sanity for the majority of the novels, both authors explore the limits of mental endurance in their concluding chapters. Orwell mostly explores the extent to which emotional disconnection can protect Winston from trauma. Winston is caught by a member of the Thought Police, thrown into prison and tortured in Room 101. He is deprived of food and experiences immense suffering. Orwell adopts a different approach to his writing for this specific section of the novel; a fixation develops on how the physical suffering impacts Winston's body. With the reader's use of hindsight, a differentiation can be made between mental and physical suffering, and Orwell displays this through narrative. "The dull pain in his belly never went away, but sometimes it grew better and sometimes worse, and his thoughts expanded and contracted accordingly."<sup>16</sup> This turning point in the novel sees Winston's feelings control his thoughts, rather than the opposite. Winston's suppression of emotional suffering links with emotional disconnection, but physical suffering cannot be suppressed by emotional manipulation. Emotional control becomes irrelevant to Winston when at the epitome of suffering - "Nothing in the world was so bad as physical pain. In the face of pain, there are no heroes."<sup>17</sup> Winston loses control of his emotions entirely, laughing uncontrollably alongside hallucinated comrades<sup>18</sup>, and in turn loses his rebellious individuality - caving to the mind-washing of O'Brien and betraying Julia. As a result of manipulation, his emotions, and even thought processes, are controlled by physical feelings, rather than emotional control being responsible for disconnecting resulting physical feelings.

Contrasting with Winston, Offred experiences very little physical pain, but also experiences a loss of control over her emotions towards the end of the novel. She receives a jarring wake-up call to the threat of annihilation when Ofglen's role in the resistance is discovered, and she realises she's entirely at the mercy of the Government. She goes on to experience interludes of intense emotions and emptiness as she confronts both the threat to her existence and the futility of fighting for survival - "But I feel serene, at peace, pervaded with indifference"<sup>19</sup>. Rather than maintaining a consistent level of disconnection - as she does throughout the majority of the novel - the situational imbalance and immediate threat creates emotions not confined by her protective barriers. She spirals and similarly to

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<sup>15</sup> 'Nineteen Eighty-Four', Orwell, pg 223

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. pg 262

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. pg 274

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. pg 279

<sup>19</sup> 'The Handmaid's Tale', Atwood, pg 303

Winston, physical feelings overpower her emotional suppression - "I now feel cold, seeping over my skin like water". Rather than feeling numb to the power of the State, she is experiencing fear because the immediate threat to her life has prioritised emotional responses as a survival reflex over her usual coping mechanism.

Offred's undoing is predominantly based around the overruling of physical feelings over mental suffering, with sexual desire becoming a prominent theme. Offred retains her suppression coping mechanism, but when she starts sneaking off to see Nick (the family chauffeur) her sexual desire is reinvigorated. Because of the internal void she experiences due to the loss of her family, Offred becomes unbalanced, and feels she has nothing else of value in her life other than sex "I didn't even think of it as giving myself to him, because what did I have to give?"<sup>20</sup> Pining after her family was suggested to be a fruitless task throughout the novel, and Offred contemplates the hopelessness of it many times. She often feels entirely worthless, but she is unable to easily commit suicide due to precautions taken by the government (glass is shatterproof or removed entirely and there are no available outcrops to hang a noose off). Offred therefore exists on a thin plane of suffering, thinking about the possibility of reuniting with her family because that is the only thing she can hold onto with some kind of deep connection. Because Offred had delicately balanced on the distant suggestion of happiness for so long, the immediate promise of pleasure was jarring and arguably addictive. She becomes reckless, risking her life to visit Nick because hoping to see her family again has minimal value in comparison to sex - "The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him."<sup>21</sup> She gives up on rebellion, and drifts from Ofglen, a member of the resistance and a previous beacon of hope. She feels relief rather than regret, and reminisces on her mother's words - "Truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations."<sup>22</sup> When compared to modern day living, it seems unreasonable that a person should give up on their freedom just for sex, which reiterates the emotional deprivation suffered by Offred in her society. Her priorities are reorganised to fill the emotional void she deals with and ignore the consequences. This is because she has grown accustomed to the inevitability of death and therefore immediate pleasure is sought after, as there is no guarantee for the future.

In '1984', the influence of sex on rebellion differs greatly to 'The Handmaid's Tale', as sex does not replace the concept of rebelling for freedom, but fuels it instead. Julia is Winston's lover, and they have a secret affair which is a crime in itself. Affairs separate from State organisation are classed as rebellion in both fictional societies, perfectly demonstrated when Winston says to Julia "The more men you've had, the more I love you. Do you understand?"<sup>23</sup> This suggests that Winston loves Julia for her rebellious mindset and therefore the fact she has slept with many people. It is also shown through Offred

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<sup>20</sup> 'The Handmaid's Tale', Atwood, pg 280

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. pg 283

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. pg 283

<sup>23</sup> 'Nineteen Eighty-Four', Orwell, pg 144

observing "This [Nick's] room is one of the most dangerous places I could be."<sup>24</sup> So even in a society where reproduction is a high priority, the State will punish her simply because she is stepping out of line. However, whilst Offred resigns herself to the punishment resulting from her actions, Winston finds stimulation from starting his own personal rebellion and uses it to drive a focus towards large-scale rebellion "Their embrace had been a battle, the climax a victory. It was a blow struck against the party. It was a political act."<sup>25</sup> Similarly to Offred, Winston's disconnection from his emotions causes him to behave unnaturally when encountering immediate pleasure in the form of sex. Contrasting to Offred, Winston finds himself unable to physically respond to desire - "...he could do what he liked with her. But the truth was that he had no physical sensation, except that of mere contact... He was glad that this was happening, but he had no physical desire. It was too soon, her youth and prettiness had frightened him, he was too much used to living without women."<sup>26</sup> Rather than being overwhelmed, he experiences physically underwhelming results due to the disconnection he's experienced for so long. As a result, his feelings of elation are mostly cognitive and connect to the concept that the experience is an act of rebellion. This prevents a spiral into the addiction of physical pleasure that Offred experiences, which is a way to counteract the emptiness she experiences in her vulnerable state due to trauma. Winston therefore finds the sexual experience less intoxicating than Offred, which allows him to hone in his desire to focus on rebellion.

By finding a purpose in rebellion, Winston is able to reconnect with some of his positive emotions and Orwell highlights it through contrast with the world he lives in. Orwell includes symbols of colour throughout the novel - Winston's first rendezvous with Julia is filled with colour - Continuous reference to bluebells, Winston's comparison to "The Golden Country"<sup>27</sup> of his dreams, and a conversation about Julia's eyes. These details are small, but in 'Politics and the English Language' Orwell advised "If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out."<sup>28</sup> This confirms that every mention of colour in the novel is of great importance, otherwise they wouldn't be present in the novel whatsoever, and when the world Winston lives in is almost entirely devoid of colour - "...there seemed to be no colour in anything."<sup>29</sup> - the small details stand out. Julia is an emblem of colour throughout the novel, even wearing makeup at one of their meetings - "her lips were deeply reddened, her cheeks rouged..."<sup>30</sup> The makeup itself is an act of rebellion whilst also making her more desirable to Winston, connecting him more with his emotions, and the colour itself - red - also reflecting this. The colour, like the emotional connections, are fleeting. In Part 2 Chapter 3, several pages after Winston met Julia for their rendezvous, a rocket bomb detonates in the street and covers them in plaster - "Julia's face...deathly white, as white as chalk. Even her lips were white. She was dead!"<sup>31</sup> The lack of colour and the immediate

<sup>24</sup> 'The Handmaid's Tale', Atwood, pg 281

<sup>25</sup> 'Nineteen Eighty-Four', Orwell, pg 145

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. pg 138

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. pg 142

<sup>28</sup> 'Politics and the English Language', Orwell

<sup>29</sup> 'Nineteen Eighty-Four', Orwell, pg 4

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. pg 164

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. pg 148

fear for Julia's wellbeing is logical but also metaphorical - the colour is gone, then so must be Julia and any positive feelings he hasn't suppressed. This contrast with the last chapter is sobering for Winston and the reader - there isn't any colour in the city, and so there cannot be any positive emotions. If Winston tries to find colour or happiness, he risks getting hurt through the inevitable loss of it.

In conclusion, both '1984' and 'The Handmaid's Tale' offer in-depth explorations into individual suffering under totalitarian rule, whilst highlighting elements of psychological coping mechanisms applicable to each other and humanity as a whole. There is a clear difference in the character's circumstances, which creates variation in how they respond to sources of emotional complexity, such as death and sexual desire. Both characters experience a spiral into compliance, however there is admirable intent at remaining individualistic - "Being in a minority, even in a minority of one, did not make you mad. There was truth and there was untruth, and if you clung to the truth even against the whole world, you were not mad."<sup>32</sup> Life experienced under State control varies greatly from reality and the characters experience extreme suffering, but the basic human traits which are laid bare offer a connection for the readers to the characters, which is arguably what makes this genre of fiction so popular.

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<sup>32</sup> 'Nineteen Eighty-Four', Orwell, pg 247

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