

# Brave new world and the handmaid's tale



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Disillusioned by the societies that lay before them, Huxley and Atwood crafted fascinatingly bleak, futuristic satires in which the past had been abolished. Within the midst of Huxley's technocratic London and Atwood's theocratic Gilead, two dehumanised masses merely exist to fulfil the ideologies of their omnipotent rulers. Each society of conditioned and religiously brainwashed individuals appeals to the modern reader, as such ideas are horrifically paralleled to the potential future of our world. Both *Brave New World* and *The Handmaid's Tale* isolate sexual intercourse from emotions and reproduction.

In *Brave New World*, society worships Henry Ford's dictum that "history is bunk" and thus, completely disregard it. The "bad old days" tradition of monogamy is utterly obscene; the hypnopaedically taught notion that "everyone belongs to everyone else" is "axiomatic" and obstinate. Bernard's uncomfortable abbreviation of 'mother' to "-m" in chapter 11 also expresses the World State's abhorred attitude to the concept of family; it is full of "suffocating intimacies". Bernard's mere incapability to completely verbalise the word, strips the term "mother" of its nurturing semantics and the reader is left with a meaningless nasal consonant.

It is interesting that initially, Bernard is the reader's point of reference, as he is an outsider from the moral turmoil. Here, however, they can no longer relate to his normalcy, as Bernard displays an otherness that the reader finds horrifying, yet compulsive. The employment of Malthusian belts and pregnancy substitutes warrants the need for another method of birth - "decanting" - Huxley's mechanised and impersonal way to engender humans in artificial wombs, making them a monotonous, scientific advance.

In a procedure rich in empirical control, “ the coincidence [is] not particularly surprising” that characters often share a surname, such as Lenina and Fanny Crowne. This generates an afterimage for the reader of an indifference to meeting others whom we share a surname with. As relations today are cherished to the extent of paternity testing and natural births, a divergence in parental morality is emphasised between our world and theirs, which potentially fascinates the reader further.

Correspondingly, the World State’s adoption of “ Bokanovskification” and a “ caste system” force identical batches of children onto a scale from infantilism to virtuosity. The lower castes, such as “ Epsilons”, are “ foredoomed”; their lives are so banal and interchangeable that they barely exist in the first place. In both novels, the positioning of humans on a hierarchy of worth is highlighted by the authors’ representations of colour. For example, both utilise the colour “ khaki” in divergent ways, dependent upon whom the colour is assigned to.

In Atwood’s novel, the almighty “ Aunts” wear “ khaki dresses” which ties the prestigious connotation of the Armed Forces to their superior clearance level. On the other hand, Huxley’s inferior “ Delta” castes wear khaki-coloured uniforms, which in the context of their menial role, associations of dirt and laborious work are attached. Atwood has Offred describe how they dress in the “ colour of blood, which defines us”. Reducing the complexity of a human being to the connotations of a colour is unfathomably immoral, appealing to a reader who cannot imagine living in a world where everybody is stripped of their individuality.

The idea of impersonal procreation is mirrored in *The Handmaid's Tale*. After the ritualistically impassive "ceremony", the Commander leaves, "closing the door with exaggerated care behind him." It is notably paradoxical that the act is titled a semantically positive "ceremony", yet Offred proclaims it is only "bearable" when she abides by the maxim: "One detaches oneself. One describes." Offred's desensitised attitude toward such a cataclysmic regime captures her in a light of tragic robotism.

This characterisation of Offred is juxtaposed with glimpses of her former life with Luke and what she "once could do" in chapter 17. The reader may be drawn to the recognisability of Offred's past to their everyday life; sympathy for Offred's situation heightens the fear and appeal we feel as readers, as we imagine her circumstances being ours. Conversely, it could be proposed that both worlds are not completely devoid of hope, as each contains tiny pockets of escape for the oppressed. Huxley's novel features many escape hatches - the most frequent being a psychological getaway - Soma.

The universally putative wisdom that "a gramme is better than a damn" exemplifies the drug's function as an instant gratification, having "all the advantages of Christianity and alcohol; none of their defects". The drug also functions under the concept of "Our Freud's" 'Pleasure Principal', being "the instinctual seeking of pleasure and avoiding of pain [...] to satisfy biological and psychological needs." Soma generates a theme of the incompatibility of happiness and the truth; people are taught to be reliant upon fictitious contentment, which blinds them to their dystopian reality.

To this end, World State citizens are not appealing to the reader for their lack of humanity, but for their intentional obliviousness toward the dystopia they are living in. The idea that “ what is so compelling-and insidious [is] that you could be living in a dystopia and not even know it” (John Joseph Adams) may appeal to a reader who interprets the novel as a caution, as they might be equally oblivious to the dystopia surrounding them. The totalitarian “ Republic of Gilead” rules on the principle of fear, yet the ambiguously named “ Aunts”, “ Angels” and “ Guardians” appear as biblical saviours for the feeble in order to ‘ own’ them.

Contrastingly to Huxley’s characters, the Handmaids are aware of their dystopian circumstances, yet rarely see it physically. Sightlessness is a motif and escape route within the novel; chapter 4 notes the peripheral vision-obstructing “ wings” as part of the Handmaids’ attire. Atwood describes Offred’s eyes obediently closed during ceremonies, as well as the Aunts limiting the Handmaids’ view of the world via film in chapter 14: “ they only show us victories, never defeats. ” The concept of sightlessness links to darkness, tapping into the readers fears, which heightens the excitement and appeal of the novel.

Arguably, the most significant example of deliberate blindness exists in the preliminaries of chapter 10 - Offred sings the hymn “ Amazing Grace”, admitting “ I don’t know if the words are right [...] I can’t remember. ” In actuality, she alters the final line from: “ Was blind, but now I see”, to: “ Was bound, but now am free”. The admittance that she “ can’t remember” implies that her lyrical decisions are unconscious, drawing upon the “ dark,

inaccessible part of our personality”, the Freudian ‘ Id’, which is concerned with our “ instinctual drives” and deepest desires.

Offred’s diction of “ free” is indicative that her deepest desires are not to remove her wings and see her reality, but to solely evade it - to be free. This creates reader sympathy for Offred, as Gilead’s detrimental ability to affect citizens on an unconscious level accentuates their malevolence and appeal as a powerful entity. Interpretation is condemned in both novels because it has the potential to create variances in belief systems, sparking anarchy by jeopardising each ruler’s vision of equilibrium.

Perhaps the greatest example of this is religion; both dictators eradicate all forms of religion, apart from the ones they invent and force upon their people. In Huxley’s novel, the faith of “ Fordism” is created to worship Henry Ford’s revolutionary methods of mass production. Characters curse using 21st century satirically minced oaths in a tone of Fordism, such as “ for Ford’s sake” and “ Ford knows”. With society brainwashed into Fordism, it is interesting that Mustapha Mond, a World Controller, is one of the very few characters who owns a copy of The Holy Bible, alongside John “ The Savage”.

In a conversation between them, Mond admits he keeps “ God in the safe and Ford on the shelves”, suggesting his attachment to a previous era of religion and his hypocrisy in then manufacturing a new society without it. Mond’s use of the transitive verb “ make” in the declarative “ you can’t make tragedies without social instability” epitomises the level of meditation that crafted the World State. A 1930’s reader would possibly find Mond’s

manipulation of religion more frightful; the Great Depression at the time saw a resurgence of the church, due to the spiritual peace it could offer America.

Readers possibly find the impertinence of Mond's actions to dehumanise via reinventing Christianity appealing due to their contextually taboo nature.

Atwood has the Handmaids greet others with "Blessed be the fruit", alluding to the 'Deuteronomy: 4' section of The Holy Bible, starting: "Blessed be the fruit of your womb..." The fact that the Handmaids are programmed to regurgitate a line from the Bible infers the sheer theocracy of Gilead: women are fed Christian values regardless of whether they believe them.

Similarly to Huxley's novel, "the Bible is kept locked up" by the Commander, "for it is an incendiary device". They "can be read to" but "cannot read" it. The prohibition of interpretation keeps the Handmaids psychologically confined into the perimeters of Gilead's ideologies. American criminologist, Gresham Sykes, asserts that the deprivation of liberty and autonomy almost indefinitely leads to aggression.

It is from this that the reader is possibly appealed by Gilead's audacious methods of religiously imprisoning the only population of women that are reproductively sacred, as they could inflame an aggressive outbreak and lose their services in doing so. In Huxley's novel, the masses are dehumanised by unification. Le Bon's 'Crowd Theory', in conjunction with Freud's theses, actualises the concept of 'Deindividuation' - "as a part of the mass, the individual acquires a sense of infinite power, which allows him to act on impulses that he would otherwise curb as an isolated individual.

The idea of a “group mind” is demonstrated in chapter 14: following the death of John’s mother Linda, “the nurse stood irresolute” and John’s trauma is reduced to a simple “kneeling figure”. The infants being “death-conditioned” next to the scene are described as a “nightmare of indistinguishable sameness [...] like maggots”. The zoomorphism of the twins into “maggots” intensifies the group as a singular army – a “khaki mob” – which explains their grotesque behaviour as a result of being deindividuated.

Being “Bokanovskified” has created the sense of “indistinguishable sameness”; each individual is made anonymous, which makes the herd more powerful, unpredictable and appealing to the reader, as the characters’ actions are no longer foreseeable. The Handmaid’s Tale portrays multiple examples of deindividuated characters acting impulsively due to “safety in numbers” (Freud). Chapter 13 features a group of Handmaids chanting “her fault [...] in unison” to Janine, a Handmaid who was raped. Their chants form a body of unethical yet unidentifiable voices, fuelling the group for their attack.

In chapter 43 as the alleged rapist emerges, the animalistic quality of the crowd as they “surge forward” like a “tide of cloth” also disembodies them. Ofglen, an arguably mild Handmaid, is “propelling herself with her elbows”, demonstrating the power of a group to gravely distort an individual’s morality. It could be suggested that readers are appealed by this concept in the same way that many people were captivated by The Stanford Prison Experiment (Professor Phillip Zimbardo, 1971), which surfaced previously to Atwood’s novel.



The social-psychological phenomenon exposed how the Deindividuation of artificially characterised 'guards' and 'inmates' could lead to an outbreak of anonymous hostility. With birth and life so bleakly represented in the novels, it is not unfitting that both trivialise death. The Nurse at Linda's bedside in Brave New World is perplexed at John's outcry, "as though death were something terrible, as though anyone mattered that much. Comparably, Offred admits she "didn't hear the bells" that signify the death penalty, "perhaps I've become used to them." The death sentence is greeted with "the same platitudes [...] slogans [...] phrases", which robotises and rationalises the process. The presence of a "stage" for the hanging of felons as the Handmaids "file onto the lawn" to watch, turns the procedure into a performance, and potentially plays on the fascination a 21st century reader has with the mystery of death and lifelessness, no matter how chilling it is.

Conclusively, both novels manufacture sinister populations of inhumane beings that entice the readers' interests. This is corroborated by the scope of psychological theses that depict the human mind as a system attracted by otherness and horror. Essentially, the reader is captivated by the parallels that can be drawn between both dystopian novels and our world. "I would not put anything into it that human societies have not already done" - Margaret Atwood.