

The handmaid's tale  
vs. the country  
between us compare  
and contrast essay



The destructive aspects of totalitarian regimes attracted the attention of many writers during the Cold War era. One of the main issues that they explored was the state oppression of an individual who could eventually become alienated and dehumanized. Such themes as loneliness, control, and confinement occupy a prominent place in the novels and short stories of many authors.

This essay will discuss two works that eloquently illustrate the dangers of totalitarianism, namely, the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* written by Margaret Atwood (1998) and the book of poetry *The Country Between Us* by Carolyn Forché (1982). There are several similarities between these two works.

First of all, Margaret Atwood and Carolyn Forché show that the totalitarian states want to suppress people's voices in order to make them isolated, confined and easily controlled. Furthermore, these writers show how the value of love, friendship and human life in general can decline because of people's solitude and alienation. However, there is a significant difference between these literary works.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is a construction of a dystopian society that might have never existed; to some degree it is a warning to the readers who should be aware of such dangers as sexism, religious intolerance, and religious intolerance.

In her turn Carolyn Forché focuses on the real experiences of people in El Salvador whose suffering went unnoticed for a very long time. More importantly, these descriptions can be more chilling than the imaginary

world created by any writer who depicts a dystopian society. These are the main issues that should be discussed in this paper.

It is possible to distinguish several themes that play an important role in these books. One of them is the acceptance of cruelty, violence, and injustice. They are no longer regarded as something outrageous or at least unacceptable. Margaret Atwood and Carolyn Forché show that people, who live in totalitarian regimes, become accustomed to the cruel behavior of the state and its injustice.

This issue is eloquently illustrated by Margaret Atwood (1998). In particular, the author describes a scene when Ofglen and Offred see the bodies of people who have been hung because of their alleged treason. However, one of the characters says, “ This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will.

It will become ordinary” (Atwood, 1998, p. 33). Such a sentence can be uttered only by a person who often witnesses such horrible events. He/she eventually gets used to this cruelty of the government.

Similar atrocities have been described by Carolyn Forché who explores the experiences of people living in El Salvador. In this case, close attention should be paid to the poem called The Colonel. In this part of her book, the author refers to the man who carries a sack filled with “ many human ears” and he does not even try to hide them (Forché, 1982, p. 17).

The author describes this horrible behavior in a very nonchalant way in order to emphasize that totalitarian regimes can turn cruelty into a norm or

something can be tolerated. On the whole, this behavior occurs in those situations when people feel no attachment to one another and human life loses its value for them.

In many cases, they are hardly concerned with the suffering of other individuals. This is one of the issues that should not be disregarded because it occupies an important place in Atwood's novel and Forché's collection of poetry.

Another idea that both authors examine is solitude of individuals and their alienation from one another. In particular, they show that in many cases, authoritarian states deprive a person of opportunity to communicate with people who are dear to him/her. Such a strategy enables the government to make people confined and controlled.

To a great extent, this issue is addressed by the authors. For example, one can mention the poem *The Visitor* by Carolyn Forché (1982). In particular, the author describes the experiences of a prisoner who hopes that his wife's breath will be "slipping into his cell each night while he imagines his hand to be hers" because he can retain his dignity and humanity only in this way (Forché, 1982, p. 15).

When a person is deprived of this opportunity, he/she is more likely to follow the will of the state. The theme of solitude is also examined in Margaret Atwood's novel. For instance, one of the characters says, 'I was so lonely, she'd say. You have no idea how lonely I was, And I had friends, I was a lucky one, but I was lonely anyway' (Atwood, p. 122).

In part, this idea can be explained by the fact that this individual cannot talk to anyone who can share her views and feelings. As a result, this person will pay no attention to the sufferings of other people. So, themes as loneliness and alienation are important for Margaret Atwood and Carolyn Forché because they strongly influence people's attitudes and beliefs.

Apart from that, one should mention that these literary works highlight the hypocrisy of authoritarian states that claim to be virtuous and just. In most cases, the representatives of these regimes do not acknowledge that they only want to achieve power and ability to control people's behavior.

Moreover, they do not tell that they want to enslave the people of their countries.

These are the most important elements of their official propaganda. This is one of the questions that both writers pay attention to. For example, Margaret Atwood (1998) shows that the government of Gilead claims to respect the role of women in the society and their importance for the survival of the community. However, women are usually reduced to the status of concubines whose only role is the reproduction of the population.

Thus, the distinction between official propaganda and reality is very striking. To some extent, Carolyn Forché (1982) attaches importance to this problem in her poetic collection. In particular, the author shows that Salvadorian regime does not want to acknowledge that thousands of people could be imprisoned or even slaughtered by the state, even if they are completely innocent (Forché, 1982).

They can pretend there is no discontent with their policies or laws. This hypocrisy can be typical of many states, especially if they are authoritarian ones. This is one of the main problems that both writers want to emphasize in their books.

These are the main similarities between the works of Margaret Atwood and Carolyn Forché. On the whole, they demonstrate the destructive impacts of totalitarianism on a person. They can make people solitary and confined, because in this way, individuals can easily be controlled or manipulated. Under such circumstances, they are not likely to take any initiatives or independent decisions.

This is the most important idea the authors explore in their books. To a great extent, these literary works throw light on the experiences of people who fall victims of authoritarian governments. As a rule, these people are not attached to one another and they do not value interpersonal relations or even human life, and this is their greatest strategy.

Overall, these books are still worth attention because the dangers described by Atwood and Forché have not completely disappeared today. This problems depicted by these writers can be relevant to different communities even nowadays.

Nevertheless, one should remember that *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Country Between Us* have several important distinctions. The readers should pay close attention to the genre of these literary works and the goals that authors try to achieve. First of all, one should mention that Margaret

Atwood's novel can be viewed as a classical dystopian novel.

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It is aimed at describing a future society that is marked by racism, sexism, and religious prejudice (Atwood, 1998). These prejudices can still influence the ideas and decisions of many people. To a great extent, this literary work was greatly influenced by George Orwell's 1984 because this author also shows how the state can control the private life of citizens and even their sexuality.

So, the author of this book relies on previous literary works about totalitarian states. In contrast, Carolyn Forché's collection of poetry is based on real events that did take place in El Salvador. In this case, the narrator can be regarded as a direct witness of the events that affected thousands of people who were victims of the regime.

To a great extent, this author combines poetry and journalisms, and this is one of her greatest achievements since she combines rich poetic imagery with realism. Therefore, one can say these books differ in terms of genre, style and background.

Secondly, one should bear in mind that the authors differ significantly when they describe the motives underlying people's behavior and their attitude toward the state and toward others. In particular, in her novel Margaret Atwood (1998) strives to explain why people can easily become solitary and controlled.

In her opinion, people can act in this way, because they expect the government to offer some benefits to them (1998, p. 271). This idea is expressed by Offred's mother who believes that people can consent to the

policies of the state, “ as long as there are a few compensations” (Atwood, 1998, p. 271).

The author describes some women who can be humiliated by the state, but they do not protest against their policies of the state, because they can have power over other women (Atwood, 1998). In other words, they try to reconcile themselves with the state and expect some rewards or benefits.

In contrast, Carolyn Forché (1982) demonstrates that in most cases, fear is the main reason why people can become alienated from one another. Those people, who have been depicted by the author, know that their friends and acquaintances can disappear, and they do not want to suffer the same fate. This is the main factor that drives their behavior.

For example, the narrator says, “ If we go on, we might stop in the street, in the very place where someone disappeared’ (Forché, 1982, p. 9). One should take into account that totalitarian regimes can easily abduct people, especially when they disagree that with the decisions of the government.

This is why citizens may be reluctant to express discontent because they do not want to share the same fate. To some degree, their conduct is understandable. Therefore, it is possible to say that Carolyn Forché and Margaret Atwood look at people’s behavior from different perspectives.

There are other distinguishing features of these books. One can argue that Margaret Atwood’s novel can be regarded as a warning to the readers who should remember about the dangers of religious intolerance, sexism, and the belief that some groups of people should be subservient to others. Margaret



Atwood (1998) examines the social phenomena that may exist in different communities.

However, she describes their impact when they are developed to full extreme. Nevertheless, one cannot say that this novel refers to particular historic events. The author intends to demonstrate people have to limit the power of the state. In her turn, Carolyn Forché (1982) strives to show that the horrors of dystopian novels can easily come true and in some cases, they can be more terrible.

Her intention is to demonstrate that such events can affect many people provided that no one protests against the cruel policies of the state. She wants readers to hear “ the cries of those who vanish” because these people are not protected in any way (Forché, 1982, p. 9).

As it has been said before, the author acts as a journalist who tries to raise readers' awareness about the atrocities committed against people, living in El Salvador. This is one of the goals that she tries to achieve.

Therefore, it is possible to distinguish several similarities and distinctions between these books. First of all, these authors demonstrate that the policies of the state can make individuals solitary, alienated, and confined. Moreover, these writers demonstrate the hypocrisy of the regimes that claim to respect the rights and dignity of citizens. Nevertheless, these literary works differ in terms of genre and purpose.

Margaret Atwood (1998) relies on the rich tradition of a dystopian novel while Carolyn Forché (1982) focuses on the feelings of people who suffered

from the actions of a totalitarian state. Nevertheless, these works produce a long-lasting impression on the readers because they give them deep insights into the nature of totalitarianism.

On the whole, such themes as confinement, loneliness, and control play an important role in the works of many authors, especially those ones who focus on the adverse influence of state on an individual. In many cases, they can deprive people of their humanity and ability to take independent decisions.

Such writers as Carolyn Forché and Mary Atwood show that individuals can get used to cruelty or injustice because of fear or hope to receive some compensation from the state.

Moreover, their alienation and solitude decrease the value of human life. These writers warn readers about the dangers of these regimes. These works are worth attention because they eloquently illustrate the experiences of people who can be victimized by the state. This is one of the messages that these writers convey.

Atwood, M. (1998). *The Handmaid's Tale*. New York: Anchor.

Forché, C. (1982). *The Country Between Us*. New York: Harper Perennial.