

# The handmaid's tale and 1984



The Handmaid's Tale was written against the backdrop of the feminist movement. During this period Thatcher was elected as the first female Prime Minister in Britain. Although Thatcher was female she was masculine in her governance of the country. The Handmaid's Tale presents a society where the achievements of the feminist movement are suppressed and "The growing power of this "religious right" heightened feminist fears that the gains women had made in previous decades would be reversed.

Also, at the time of writing The Handmaid's Tale, there were many fundamentalist religious groups worldwide, for example in Iran, where women were veiled under the regime. Possibly, Atwood was warning of rule under a theocracy and encouraging society to promote religious diversity as a way of life. 1984 was written after World War 2 in 1948. Orwell's political beliefs are reflected in the novel. He was strongly opposed to the principles of Communism as practiced in the USSR, and Dictatorships, yet was committed to Socialism spending time as a homeless person in Paris, documented in 'Down and out in Paris and London'.

He documented working life in 'The Road to Wigan Pier'. This was the driving force behind his time fighting in the Spanish Civil War. There are parallels between Communist Russia and the state of Oceania. Both are ruled by fascist dictators, Stalin and Big Brother; both governments use propaganda to control the population. In both dystopian novels controlling language is a central means of social control. Written language is used to control the populations of Oceania and Gilead. Biblical precedent is used, and manipulated, to justify the brutal totalitarian regime implemented in The Handmaid's Tale.

The Bible is used to justify the new way of life, but only those in power have access to the Bible, and there is no one correct interpretation of its meaning”

2 In effect, society is ruled by abusing the faith of its people and distorting the words of their holy book. Many aspects of the Bible are ignored, as they are incompatible with the regime, such as the Commandment “ Thou shalt not kill”. The Aunts declare “ Blessed are the meek” in reference to the Handmaids, yet they fail to include the remainder where the meek ‘ shall inherit the Earth’.

They use language to keep the Handmaids in their place in the hierarchy of society. Biblical elements are taken very literally, a key example being the ethos behind the primary purpose of society - to breed. This is demonstrated in the epigraph where the story of Rachel and Bilhah is used to ratify the way in which children are conceived: “ Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her”. This adherence to religious codes is similar to Middle Eastern countries such as Iran and Afghanistan where the state religion is Islam.

In Islam, the purpose of marriage is to procreate and raise children in the Islamic faith. Also in these countries women are veiled and denied the right to read and write, like the Handmaids. In The Handmaid's Tale, only men are allowed to read the Bible so that their views are unopposed. Similarly, Orwell uses revisionist history. Historical textbooks are rewritten to suit The Party's purposes, so that children are indoctrinated from an early age and grow up viewing the Party in a positive light. Also the Party changes the events of the past e. . claiming they invented the aeroplane.

This makes it impossible for any Party member to question the validity of the claims made by the Party as written history confirms that the Party is accurate in all aspects of life. Atwood states that she “ didn’t think that language would be that different from now” 3 . Language changes in The Handmaid’s Tale as Atwood sinisterly makes use of words that would normally be associated with positive, emotions and manipulates them into having negative, fearful connotations. One example is the word ‘ Aunt’.

Typically, an aunt is a caring person: however, all stereotypical images of an Aunt are quashed in Gilead. The Aunts inflict sadistic punishment upon the Handmaids if they rebel: “ Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prongs slung on thongs from their leather belts”. Atwood employs this method of exploiting language “ in an effort to restructure the way people are allowed to think about their world” 4. Similarly, Orwell also uses contradictory terms. The names of each of the ministries are by their very nature unrealistic.

The Ministry of Love is concerned with torture; the Ministry of Peace with war whilst the Ministry of Plenty is anything but, rationing food. These “ Euphemisms allow for a flux of emotion and thus can serve as a means to instill great passion or remove fear and hatred” 5. In both 1984 and The Handmaid’s Tale, language is used to deny individuality to citizens and to enforce conformity to the ruling Party’s beliefs. Individuals in Gilead have their freedom removed. This is done by the “ conscious elimination of literacy among the population” 6.

Women in Gilead are denied the basic right of being able to read and write. The elimination of education is a ploy to 'dumb down' women. The regime removes any power that they had ascertained from knowledge making them inferior and dependent on the males in society. " Despite all of Gilead's pro-women rhetoric, such subjugation creates a society in which women are treated as subhuman. " 7 Offred savours words when she plays Scrabble with the Commander and states that her ' tongue felt thick with the effort of spelling.

It was like using a language I'd once known but had nearly forgotten'. Atwood signals that education is absent by describing the removal of educational buildings and their new functions under the regime. The ' Red Centre' was a school: Offred describes sleeping in ' what had once been the gymnasium'. Dissidents are hung on ' The Wall' which is outside the university building. This conditions people in Gilead to associate educational buildings and educational itself with threats to their survival. Orwell uses contractions in language in 1984.

Members of the Party are unable to express their thoughts and emotions because they are being denied freedom of speech and language to express themselves and consequently, regress. The Party controls the language they are allowed to use and this gradually eliminates most of the Oldspeak dictionary so that the Party members no longer know words other than those created by the Party in the Newspeak dictionary. Newspeak is a new language that proposes to abolish as many unnecessary words as possible in an attempt to eradicate dissent. They are ' cutting the language down to the bone'.

The removal of knowledge and capacity for thought is key to preventing the creation of dissidents. The populations in both novels are told what to think say and do. Both protagonists are wary of who they talk to and fear being caught saying the wrong thing. In 1984 Winston is careful of what he says to Syme and he concludes that ' One of these days... Syme will be vaporized. He is too intelligent'. In this dystopian society language and knowledge are detrimental to the survival of people in the society. Even paralinguistic features are dangerous.

When Nick is first introduced in *The Handmaid's Tale* he winks at Offred and Offred instantly assumes that " Perhaps it was a test... Perhaps he is an Eye". Professionally, Winston is a revisor of the past. He re-writes history so that it matches the ' current party line'. In 1984 the act of ' facecrime' can result in imprisonment. Offred's occupation before the regime took over was in the transfer of hard copies of books to electronic copies. This would allow books to be edited easily and history and language to be rewritten, but the citizens pre-Gilead simply saw this as progress.

The unchallenged political faction known only as the Party in 1984 is copiously aware of the malleability of human ideals through thought and language and uses this knowledge in the pursuit of completely unabridged power" 8One strategy that Orwell uses to achieve this is creating an entire new language called Newspeak. Words enable communication and the sharing of ideas and the Party has used this fact and manipulated it to control the Party members. Newspeak comprises of simple, straightforward words which limit the vocabulary of the population.

As Syme states: ' Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it'. This prevents complex thinking in Party members so that they are incapable of rebelling. Language is very monotonous in 1984, evoking no passionate responses, which adds to the blindly obeying population of " sheep" in Oceania. Atwood, like Orwell, uses neologisms in her novel. Some, such as ' Unbaby', ' Shredder' and ' unwoman' are used to dehumanise the people that society rejects.

This makes the use of these words acceptable in casual conversation and allows detachment from human emotion when one used. Similarly, in 1984 criminals who have been ' vaporized' are referred to as ' unpersons'. Neologisms are used to mask the truth and detach people from the real meaning of them, so that they almost have no conscious or compassion. In this way, " Gilead creates an official vocabulary that ignores and warps reality in order to serve the needs of the new society's elite" 9. Patronymics are given to the Handmaids to show that they are ' owned' by men such as ' Of-fred' and ' Of-glen'.

A simple thing like a name is removed from them to deny their identity and make them submissive. However, Atwood shows that names cannot be suppressed in reality. This is shown by the importance that Offred places on her ' real name', ' I tell him my real name and feel therefore that I am known'. Atwood plays games with Offreds ' real name', she does not reveal it directly in the narrative but gives indirect clues such as ' moon' and the

name swapping between beds in Chapter 1 to engage the readers curiosity. This is yet another play on language.

Language is distorted in both novels. This is similar to politicians today who use propaganda in an effort to win voters. Also, as in the *The Handmaid's Tale*, there is media censorship in the form of news blackouts e. g. in China, opposing views to the Government's are censored. Newspapers and magazines are collected and burnt. However, when Offred has her first private encounter with the Commander, she observes that there are 'bookcases. They're filled with books. Books and books and books, right out in plain view... No wonder we can't come in here.

It's an oasis of the forbidden. ' There are clear double standards present in Gilead. Atwood explores issues of censorship using two extremes, firstly in the removal of newspapers and secondly when Offred recalls how her mother burnt pornographic magazines as part of the feminism movement. Atwood uses these extremes to show how similar actions can result in differing consequences. Orwell uses language as an indicator of social class. The Proles use a working class register: the prole woman in the cinema said ' they didn't oughter of showed it'.

One would expect the Party members to use more sophisticated language as they are higher up the social ladder but Orwell subverts the stereotypical view and their language is restricted. Winston states that the proles are the only hope for an uprising against the Party. However, the proles do not take advantage of the freedoms (in comparison to Party members) that they



have. Although they could express themselves in any way possible they continue to use a limited working class register.

The prole woman's song is ironic as it was generated by a machine.

Language is a definitive example of the difference between human beings and other animals' 10. The proles are described the Party as being equal to animals. Atwood also uses this technique with the Marthas who use colloquialisms such as ' It could of been me'. The act of writing is forbidden in both novels. Once Winston purchases the diary he acknowledges that he is a ' dead man'. By writing, he is attempting to communicate with future generations in to remind them of the harsh realities he faced. In The Handmaid's Tale, it is revealed in the Historical Notes that Offred's account is a reconstruction on a series of tapes.

By using this method of communication she tells the reader the extent of her feelings and the reality of what happens, which is uncensored. Atwood employs reconstruction as a narrative device as Offred describes events after they have occurred and to signal that Offred has escaped. There is a further reconstruction as Professor Pieixoto reconstructs Offred's narrative. The ' Historical Notes ' are a structural device to show that the regime has been overthrown as it is set in the future where people are discussing what happened in Gilead in the past.

Similarly, the appendix in 1984 is written in the past tense, showing that Newspeak is a thing of the past. The ' Historical Notes' show that sexism is still alive in society as the language used is full of sexual innuendo. Professor Pieixoto makes sexist jokes such as using the terms ' tails' and ' frailroad'

during his speech and we are led to believe that his views reflect the views of society. " The Professor neglects the most crucial element on this story: Offred herself". 11 The Professor focuses on the identity of the Commander as opposed to the struggles that Offred faced in the patriarchal Gilead.

He does not take Offred's account as fact and sidesteps " the critical moral issues raised by her account" 12. Offred's narrative is an episodic one. It is not in chronological order like Winston's in 1984. Atwood does not use a linear narrative as if she did she would not be able to tell Offred's story fully and she enjoys giving tiny snippets of information about Offred's past enticing us to read more. Atwood and Orwell astutely exploit language as it reflects a crucial element of civilisation. Both novels warn against the possibility of a dystopian future and how easily it can happen.