

Finding an equal balance: comparing 1984 and the blind assassin



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As human beings, we are fascinated by our past. The past affects society in so many ways most don't even notice the effect and humans accept that conclusion. Whether it be the language spoken or the city a person lives in, everything around us has history or some sort of meaning behind it. As a society, we have chosen to embrace and learn from our past. While this is one way of handling history, both George Orwell and Margaret Atwood make a statement about the role and power of the past in their respective novels, 1984 and The Blind Assassin. George Orwell's novel 1984 describes a dystopian world where "Big Brother" and the government controls everything its citizens do, say, and even think. One major aspect of Orwell's society is the complete control and erasure of history. In Orwell's novel, the government takes precautions to ensure that the history of their nation is hidden or completely rewritten. The Blind Assassin by Margaret Atwood in contrast, tells the story of an elderly woman named Iris as she writes a novel of her entire past life to her granddaughter Sabrina. Atwood emphasizes, maybe even over emphasizes, the past. Orwell and Atwood both create storylines that describe the two extremes of ignoring the past and completely living in it in an effort to prove the importance in finding a balance between the two.

In 1984, Orwell tries to belittle the past by eliminating "Oldspeak" and replacing it with a completely different language called "Newspeak". Newspeak is an overly simplified language that is completely detached from any history.. Real language has history and roots. Oldspeak, or English, has Germanic and Latin roots. When people share a common language, they share a common history and this brings them together. The Blind Assassin by

Margaret Atwood is a perfect example of people being able to connect through language and literature. The unnamed man and woman connect with each other as the unnamed man tells his stories to his lover, the unnamed woman, about the thrilling adventures of X and the Silent Princess. Atwood makes sure to focus on the importance of language and the history behind it.

Moreover, Orwell removes all literary connections to the past. Syme speaks to Winston about Newspeak describing, " By 2050, earlier, probably - all real knowledge of Oldspeak will have disappeared. The whole literature of the past will have been destroyed. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron - they'll exist only in Newspeak versions, not merely changed into something different, but actually changed into something contradictory of what they used to be." (Orwell 56). In today's society, the knowledge and appreciation of people like Shakespeare and Chaucer allows people to connect. By eliminating Oldspeak and literary figures, Orwellian society loses all sense of community and history, and this is exactly what Orwell wants his readers to see and understand. He shows us that a society that does not have history to guide it does not function.

Atwood places considerable emphasis on literary references in her book. She definitely does not shy away from name dropping people like Ovid, Lord Tennyson, and even Victor Hugo. Although their general education is quite limited, Iris and Laura learn Latin, French, and they read books upon books. Iris once said, " I'd pick out books that interested me: A Tale of Two Cities, by Charles Dickens; Macaulay's histories; The Conquest of Mexico and The Conquest of Peru, illustrated. I read poetry as well, and Miss Violence <https://assignbuster.com/finding-an-equal-balance-comparing-1984-and-the-blind-assassin/>

occasionally made a half-hearted attempt at teaching by having me read it out loud" (Atwood 155). The girls literary education is far beyond just limited. This is a way for Atwood to further show the importance of history. But at the same time, Atwood connects their literary education to someone horrible, Mr. Erskine. Their abusive tutor who, " would whack the desks beside our fingers with his ruler, and the actual fingers too, or cuff us across the back of the head when exasperated or last resort hurl books at us or hit us across the backs of our legs" (Atwood 162). Iris and Laura's connection to history and education would be destroyed if every time they thought of it they would be reminded of him. This could be a warning from Atwood to not get too close to your past.

In 1984, in a manner that calls to mind Iris in *The Blind Assassin*, Winston has a diary. In this diary he uses Oldspeak where he writes down his " forbidden" thoughts. But because of Big Brother and the government Winston is prohibited from writing anything down at all. Winston tells the readers, " Whether he went on with the diary, or whether he did not go on with it, made no difference. The Thought Police would get him just the same" (Orwell 19). On the contrary, the entire novel of *The Blind Assassin* consists of Iris spilling out all her emotions and her entire life onto paper, using her language to describe how she feels in an attempt to connect with her granddaughter. While writing her book, she describes every single detail she can remember, as she relives her entire life again. As we go further into the book most of Iris' time is spent writing. By writing her novel and hanging onto the past, in Iris' mind she hopes to go back and fix the wrongs she made when she was younger. She even says, " To pronounce the name of

the dead is to make them live again" (Atwood 191). Iris is living in her past. All her feelings and regrets that she felt as a young woman come back to her as she writes. She states, " Time rises and rises, and when it reaches the level of your eyes you drown." (Atwood 478). Iris is drowning in her past, she is overwhelmed by all the memories she relives when writing her book.

Both Iris and Winston are suffering in their own way, as they both struggle in their search for an equal balance. Even though both authors take very different approaches, Orwell and Atwood both come to the same conclusion. The role of history in a society or a person's life is significant, but it is important to have a balance. Orwell points out the flaws in completely ignoring and erasing history by making examples of people like Winston or Julia. Atwood warns against living in the past as she focuses on Iris, who spends her whole life feeling guilty about decisions she made when she was younger. In my opinion, the powerful role of history is sometimes under acknowledged and therefore underbalanced. Everything that the human race is, all advancements and knowledge, an inheritance from those who came before us. Without them, we humans would be nowhere near as advanced as we are today.