

Dystopian Futures: A Comparative Analysis of Orwell's 1984 and Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative analysis of George Orwell's 1984 and Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, two defining works in the dystopian genre that explore the oppressive realities of authoritarianism. By examining Orwell's and Atwood's portrayals of totalitarian regimes, this study sheds light on how state power can systematically undermine personal freedoms, agency, and identity. Orwell's depiction of a society under constant surveillance where language itself is manipulated to suppress dissent resonates alongside Atwood's exploration of a theocratic society that institutionalizes gender oppression and rigid control over female bodies. This analysis illuminates the authors' insights into the mechanisms by which totalitarian systems instill fear and obedience, as well as their reflections on the resilience of the human spirit. Ultimately, the study underscores the enduring relevance of these narratives in today's dialogues on power, gender dynamics, privacy, and social justice, drawing parallels between the fictional societies of 1984 and The Handmaid's Tale and the concerns of contemporary global society.

Keywords

Dystopian Literature, Orwell, Atwood, Totalitarianism, Gender

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Introduction

Dystopian literature often functions as a warning, illustrating the potential consequences of unchecked authority and control over individuals within a society. George Orwell's *1984* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* are seminal examples of this genre, both portraying authoritarian regimes that impose rigid controls over freedom, identity, and personal autonomy. Through their bleak narratives, these works expose the vulnerabilities of societies that surrender too much power to the state and examine how oppression manifests in different forms. Orwell's *1984* explores how totalitarian systems can manipulate language, knowledge, and reality to maintain dominance, while Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* centers on theocratic rule, where gendered oppression and control over reproductive rights form the foundation of a dystopian state. This paper argues that, despite their distinct approaches, both novels explore critical themes of power, resistance, and the inherent tension between individual agency and systemic oppression. Together, *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale* provide powerful, complementary critiques of authoritarianism that remain profoundly relevant in contemporary society, particularly in discussions surrounding privacy, surveillance, and gender-based oppression.

Historical Context of Dystopian Literature

Dystopian literature has its roots in the early 20th century, reflecting the anxieties of societies grappling with unprecedented global conflicts, rapid technological advancements, and the emergence of authoritarian regimes. George Orwell's *1984*, written in the post-World War II era, serves as a pointed response to totalitarianism, particularly Stalinism and other authoritarian regimes that dominated Europe at the time. Orwell witnessed firsthand how propaganda and state control could distort truth and shape public perception, experiences which deeply informed the development of his narrative. His portrayal of a society governed by omnipresent surveillance and controlled by "Big Brother" illustrates the dangers of an all-powerful state that manipulates and erodes individual freedom.

Similarly, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985, reflects the sociopolitical climate of the 1980s, marked by a resurgence of conservative policies and intensified debates over women's rights and reproductive autonomy. Atwood drew inspiration from historical theocratic regimes, envisioning a society where religious extremism dictates every aspect of personal and public life. The novel critiques the ways in which fundamentalist ideologies can be weaponized to subjugate women, underscoring the fragility of women's rights and the ever-present threat of regression in gender equality.

Both Orwell and Atwood, through the socio-political lens of their respective periods, present dystopian societies that remain disturbingly relevant. By embedding real historical and social issues within their fictional worlds, they create narratives that echo contemporary concerns about authoritarianism, patriarchy, and the role of surveillance in modern governance. Their works transcend the times in which they were written, reminding readers of the persistent and cyclical nature of oppression, and the imperative to remain vigilant against abuses of power.

George Orwell's 1984

Overview of the Novel

1984 is set in a dystopian world where the Party, led by the elusive figure of Big Brother, maintains a rigid and totalitarian regime over the people of Oceania. Through a combination of propaganda, strict surveillance, and psychological control, the Party erodes personal freedom and reshapes reality to ensure its absolute authority. The novel's protagonist, Winston Smith, is a low-ranking member of the Party who works at the Ministry of Truth, where his job involves altering historical records to align with the Party's changing narratives. Disillusioned with the oppressive nature of his society, Winston grows increasingly determined to understand truth and freedom, setting him on a dangerous path that leads to

his tragic demise. Orwell uses Winston's journey to illustrate the dehumanizing effects of totalitarianism and the struggles of individuals to retain a sense of identity under oppressive regimes.

Mechanisms of Control

Orwell's portrayal of control in 1984 is complex and multifaceted, illustrating how the Party suppresses individuality and enforces conformity through constant surveillance, linguistic manipulation, and psychological subjugation. Telescreens, strategically placed in homes and public spaces, enable the Party to monitor citizens' every action, creating an environment of constant surveillance and making it impossible for people to have any semblance of private life. The Thought Police, an omnipresent force in the novel, enforce obedience and loyalty by seeking out and punishing even the slightest hint of dissent, further instilling fear among the population.

Language plays a critical role in Orwell's vision of control, with the Party's creation of Newspeak—a reduced and manipulated version of English—serving as a tool to restrict thought itself. Newspeak limits vocabulary and simplifies language, making it nearly impossible for people to articulate or even conceptualize thoughts of rebellion or dissatisfaction. Through the manipulation of language, the Party controls reality, as words that could foster critical or rebellious thoughts are systematically eliminated. Orwell emphasizes the importance of language as a tool for freedom, suggesting that without the words to describe it, true dissent cannot exist.

The slogan "War is Peace. Freedom is Slavery. Ignorance is Strength" epitomizes the paradoxical logic forced upon citizens in Oceania. This rhetoric, reinforced through doublethink—holding two contradictory beliefs simultaneously—demonstrates the extent to which the Party has redefined basic principles of truth and logic to suit its authoritarian needs. Through relentless indoctrination, citizens are conditioned to accept the Party's contradictions, weakening their capacity for independent thought and making resistance nearly impossible. This psychological manipulation, ingrained from a young age, strips people of their sense of reality and renders them docile and compliant.

Themes of Freedom and Rebellion

At the heart of 1984 lies Winston's yearning for freedom and individuality. His struggle begins as a silent rebellion through thought and memory but escalates into overt defiance when he initiates a forbidden relationship with Julia, a fellow Party member. Their love affair, which takes place outside the watchful eyes of Big Brother, becomes a symbolic act of resistance against the Party's insistence on total control over individuals' minds and bodies. Through Winston and Julia's relationship, Orwell examines the deep human desire for connection and intimacy, suggesting that such bonds can momentarily provide an escape from oppression.

However, Orwell ultimately presents a pessimistic view of rebellion in a society as meticulously controlled as Oceania. Winston's and Julia's rebellion is destined to fail, revealing the Party's overwhelming power to destroy even the smallest acts of defiance. The character of O'Brien, a high-ranking Party official who initially presents himself as an ally to Winston, represents the deceptive and insidious nature of totalitarian control. O'Brien's betrayal and subsequent re-education of Winston through physical and psychological torture serve to show the extent of the Party's capacity to break down even the most determined rebels, forcing them to internalize and accept the Party's doctrines.

Orwell underscores the futility of individual resistance, suggesting that in a state as pervasive and omnipotent as the one depicted in 1984, rebellion is ultimately a self-defeating endeavor. Winston's final capitulation, where he confesses his love for Big Brother, symbolizes the complete eradication of personal autonomy and the crushing of the human spirit. Through Winston's tragic end, Orwell reveals the immense psychological toll exerted on individuals in totalitarian systems and raises questions about the human capacity to retain integrity in the face of relentless oppression. In 1984, Orwell warns of the dangers of a society where absolute power is unchecked, leaving readers with a haunting reminder of the potential consequences of authoritarian control.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Overview of the Novel

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in the near-future, dystopian society of the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian regime that has overthrown the United States government. Formed in response to environmental degradation and plummeting fertility rates, Gilead is a theocratic state that enforces rigid social structures to control reproduction and morality, particularly targeting women. At the heart of this society is a strict hierarchy where individuals are assigned roles based on gender, fertility, and obedience to the state's religious doctrine.

The story is narrated by Offred, a Handmaid whose only purpose is to bear children for the ruling class Commanders and their Wives. In this regime, women's bodies are state-controlled vessels, stripped of autonomy and reduced to their biological function. Offred's personal reflections and memories of her life before Gilead, when she had a family and freedom, offer a poignant contrast to her current existence and serve as a powerful exploration of identity, memory, and the human desire for freedom. Through Offred's experiences, Atwood examines the human cost of a society where women are commodified and reduced to objects, illuminating the far-reaching effects of patriarchal oppression and the suppression of individual identity.

Mechanisms of Control

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Gilead's power structure relies heavily on religious and social doctrine to maintain control over its citizens, particularly women. The ruling elite enforce a rigid social hierarchy where women are categorized into specific roles based on their age, fertility, and compliance with the state's moral and religious codes. These roles include Wives, Aunts, Marthas, and Handmaids, each with prescribed duties and expectations that are strictly enforced. Women in Gilead are stripped of their legal rights, forbidden from reading or writing, and subjected to constant surveillance to prevent any form of resistance or rebellion. The loss of language as a tool for expression and the prohibition on reading symbolize the regime's control over women's minds as well as their bodies, reducing them to mere instruments of reproduction.

The concept of public shaming and group punishment further consolidates control, as seen in the "Salvagings" and "Particutions," where women are forced to participate in the brutal punishment of individuals deemed disobedient by the state. By making these events communal, the regime enforces complicity, ensuring that the Handmaids and other women become active participants in their own subjugation. This psychological manipulation serves to foster a sense of guilt and helplessness, making it difficult for individuals to resist the pervasive influence of Gilead's ideology.

Religion is wielded as both a justification and tool for oppression in Gilead. The state appropriates and distorts Biblical narratives to legitimize its practices, framing the subjugation of women and rigid reproductive roles as morally righteous. Passages from the Bible are selectively interpreted and altered to support the societal structure, leaving citizens with little room to question the authority of Gilead's leaders. The use of religious language and symbols to promote obedience manipulates citizens into believing that the oppressive structure of Gilead is divinely sanctioned, which makes challenging the status quo an act of sacrilege.

Themes of Power, Identity, and Resistance

Through Offred's journey, Atwood delves deeply into the themes of power, identity, and the complexities of resistance in a society that dehumanizes its citizens. Power in Gilead is absolute, permeating every aspect of life, particularly for women. Offred's memories of her past life, including her family and freedoms, contrast starkly with her current status, underscoring how Gilead systematically erases personal history to strip women of their identities and sense of self. Offred's name itself, "Of-Fred,"

signifies her status as property, as she is named for the Commander she serves. This reduction of identity is central to Gilead's power structure, as individuality and personal agency are seen as threats to the regime's stability.

Despite the oppressive atmosphere, *The Handmaid's Tale* explores the small acts of resistance that Offred and other women use to reclaim their sense of self. Offred's clandestine meetings with Nick, the Commander's chauffeur, her covert conversations with other Handmaids, and her attempts to preserve memories of her past all serve as acts of rebellion against Gilead's dehumanizing system. These subtle forms of defiance underscore the resilience of human spirit and identity, even in the face of overwhelming oppression. Offred's inner monologue and desire for freedom also highlight the importance of memory and language as forms of resistance. By remembering her life before Gilead and recounting her story, Offred resists the erasure of her identity and asserts her agency, even if only internally.

Atwood's narrative also emphasizes the complex dynamics of complicity and survival in an authoritarian society. Characters like Serena Joy, the Commander's Wife, and Aunt Lydia, who indoctrinates Handmaids into their roles, illustrate the different ways individuals may adapt to or support oppressive systems for personal survival or to wield power over others. These characters reveal that authoritarian regimes rely not only on overt violence but also on the complicity of individuals who enforce or accept the social order, adding layers to the theme of resistance and moral ambiguity.

Ultimately, *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a cautionary exploration of how power, when unchecked and justified through ideological means, can lead to the systematic dehumanization of entire groups of people. Through Offred's journey, Atwood warns against the dangers of authoritarianism, particularly in the guise of religious or moral "purity," and underscores the importance of safeguarding individual rights and identity against forces that seek to suppress them.

Gender and Power

Atwood's narrative is profoundly feminist, examining the ways in which Gilead's patriarchal structure subjugates women. The regime's classification of women into distinct roles—Handmaids, Wives, Marthas, and Aunts—illustrates the extent to which women are controlled and commodified. The Handmaids, stripped of their identities and autonomy, are forced to bear children for elite couples, reflecting the extreme measures taken to control reproduction.

The novel raises critical questions about the implications of religious fundamentalism and the politicization of women's bodies. Offred's internal struggle to maintain her sense of self amidst the dehumanizing conditions of Gilead underscores the importance of personal agency and identity in the face of oppression.

Atwood's portrayal of language as a tool of power further emphasizes the gender dynamics at play. The regime actively controls language, using it to dehumanize women and restrict their agency. For example, Handmaids are stripped of their names, being referred to only by the names of the men they serve (e.g., "Ofglen," "Ofwarren"). This linguistic control is a critical aspect of their oppression, as it removes their individuality and reduces them to mere vessels for reproduction.

Themes of Resistance and Identity

Despite the oppressive environment, *The Handmaid's Tale* also highlights themes of resistance and resilience. Offred's memories of her past life, her relationships, and her dreams serve as acts of defiance against the regime's attempts to erase her identity. Through her internal monologue, Atwood emphasizes the power of storytelling and memory as tools for survival.

The potential for rebellion is present in Gilead, albeit fraught with danger. Offred's interactions with other characters, including the enigmatic Commander and the rebellious Moira, illustrate the complexities of resistance within an oppressive system. Atwood's narrative suggests that hope exists even in the darkest circumstances, as characters navigate the tensions between compliance and

defiance.

Atwood also explores the idea of female solidarity and collective resistance. Through the character of Moira, who embodies rebellion and strength, Offred is reminded of the possibility of resistance. The underground network of women, referred to as "Mayday," further exemplifies the potential for collective action against the oppressive regime, indicating that solidarity among women can be a powerful force for change.

Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis of *1984* by George Orwell and *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood highlights both the thematic overlaps and unique perspectives each author brings to their depictions of totalitarian societies. Although both novels explore the consequences of authoritarianism, the differences in their approach reflect the distinct anxieties of their respective contexts—Orwell's mid-20th-century fears of totalitarianism and Atwood's late 20th-century feminist critique of patriarchal oppression. Each author uses dystopian settings to question the limits of freedom, identity, and resistance in environments that restrict individual agency.

Mechanisms of Control and the Erosion of Truth

In *1984*, Orwell meticulously dissects the mechanisms of control used by the Party, including surveillance, propaganda, and the manipulation of truth. The novel's Ministry of Truth epitomizes the erasure of history, turning objective reality into a tool for the Party to maintain power. Orwell's world is one where language itself is weaponized through Newspeak, a controlled language designed to limit thought and dissent. By reshaping history and curbing language, the Party seeks to control not just the citizens' actions but also their thoughts and perceptions. The constant surveillance reinforces this control, as citizens are led to believe they are always being watched, cultivating a sense of fear and mistrust among individuals.

In contrast, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* incorporates control mechanisms that are gender-specific, reflecting the Gileadean regime's focus on subjugating women through reproductive control and the rigid enforcement of gender roles. The women in Gilead are divided into classes (Handmaids, Wives, Marthas), with each group assigned specific roles that serve the state's goal of controlling reproduction and enforcing a religiously sanctioned patriarchy. Gilead's control over women's bodies is a powerful metaphor for the commodification of women, highlighting the reduction of women to their reproductive functions. Atwood's portrayal of Gilead emphasizes that, under authoritarian regimes, oppression can be gendered, exploiting and controlling individuals based on their biological characteristics.

Freedom, Identity, and the Possibility of Resistance

Both *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale* depict worlds where individual freedom is severely restricted. In *1984*, Winston's attempts at rebellion—such as keeping a diary and pursuing a forbidden relationship—represent his yearning for freedom, but these acts of resistance are eventually crushed by the Party. Orwell's bleak portrayal of Winston's failure reflects his pessimism regarding the potential for individual rebellion to overcome a totalitarian regime. The Party's thorough control of every facet of life leaves little hope for change, and the novel's ending reinforces the futility of Winston's resistance. Orwell suggests that in such an all-encompassing system of surveillance and control, rebellion is almost impossible, with any hint of individual defiance swiftly extinguished.

Atwood, however, presents a slightly different take on the possibility of resistance. While Gilead enforces strict control over women, *The Handmaid's Tale* shows glimpses of subversive acts, such as Offred's secret meetings with the Commander and her tentative alliance with Nick. Although these acts do not lead to an overt rebellion, they symbolize subtle forms of resistance against the regime. Atwood

suggests that while overthrowing such an oppressive system is perilous, resistance remains possible and takes on different forms, from quiet defiance to the creation of solidarity among the oppressed. Through Offred's internal resistance and small acts of rebellion, Atwood presents a more nuanced perspective, one that recognizes the dangers of resistance while affirming its value and necessity.

Power, Identity, and Human Resilience

The theme of power and its impact on identity is central to both novels. In 1984, Orwell examines how totalitarian power dehumanizes individuals, stripping them of autonomy and reducing them to mere instruments of the state. Winston's identity is systematically dismantled by the Party, which seeks to rewrite his memories, beliefs, and even his feelings. This control extends to personal relationships, where even love is seen as a threat. By the end of the novel, Winston's identity is entirely subsumed under the Party, illustrating Orwell's grim warning about the dehumanizing effects of unchecked power on the human spirit.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, power similarly constrains identity, particularly for women who are forced into roles defined solely by their biological functions. However, Atwood explores how individuals negotiate their identities under oppressive systems. Despite Gilead's attempts to strip women of their individuality, Offred's memories of her former life, her internal reflections, and her interactions with others allow her to retain a sense of self. This subtle preservation of identity, even when external freedom is denied, becomes a form of resilience. Atwood's portrayal of Offred's internal struggle to hold onto her identity underscores her belief that identity is not solely determined by external forces; it is also a personal and internal process that can withstand even the most restrictive environments.

Reflection on Authoritarianism and the Human Spirit

Both 1984 and *The Handmaid's Tale* invite readers to reflect on the implications of authoritarianism for the human spirit. Orwell's dystopia warns of a society where power obliterates individuality, reducing people to unquestioning followers incapable of rebellion or independent thought. Atwood, while also highlighting the dangers of authoritarianism, offers a more complex view of human agency. Her portrayal of Offred suggests that even within rigid systems, individuals can find ways to resist, adapt, and maintain a sense of self.

Ultimately, these two novels provide valuable insights into the human condition under totalitarian rule. 1984 serves as a stark warning of the consequences of political oppression, while *The Handmaid's Tale* emphasizes the gendered nature of such regimes and the potential for subversive, albeit limited, resistance. Together, Orwell and Atwood challenge readers to recognize the dangers of unchecked power and to consider the resilience required to preserve autonomy and identity in the face of oppression.

Language as a Tool of Control

Both Orwell and Atwood utilize language as a crucial mechanism of control in their dystopian societies. In 1984, the concept of Newspeak serves as a tool for the Party to limit thought and dissent. By systematically reducing the complexity of language, the regime aims to eliminate any possibility of rebellious thoughts. This linguistic manipulation creates a society in which critical thinking is rendered impossible, as citizens are left without the words to articulate their grievances.

Similarly, Atwood explores the role of language in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The regime's control over language serves to dehumanize women and strip them of their identities. The use of terms like "Handmaid" or "Ofglen" illustrates how language can be weaponized to reduce individuals to their roles within the societal hierarchy. Both authors underscore the importance of language in shaping reality, emphasizing how control over language equates to control over thought and identity.

Surveillance and Privacy

Surveillance is a pervasive theme in both novels, representing the lengths to which totalitarian regimes will go to maintain control. In 1984, the omnipresence of telescreens ensures that citizens are always being watched, leading to a culture of paranoia and self-censorship. The Party's slogan "Big Brother is watching you" encapsulates the invasive nature of surveillance, reinforcing the idea that privacy is nonexistent in a totalitarian state.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, surveillance takes on a more insidious form, as the regime employs the Eyes—secret police who monitor citizens' behavior. The

fear of being watched compels characters to conform to societal expectations, stifling their individuality and agency. Atwood's portrayal of surveillance highlights the psychological impact of living under constant observation, illustrating how it cultivates an environment of fear and compliance.

Implications for Contemporary Society

The relevance of 1984 and *The Handmaid's Tale* extends beyond their fictional worlds, resonating with contemporary societal concerns. Issues such as surveillance, censorship, and gender inequality are increasingly pertinent in today's political climate. As technological advancements continue to blur the lines between privacy and public life, the warnings embedded in these texts serve as a call for vigilance against the erosion of personal freedoms.

Orwell's portrayal of a society under constant surveillance raises critical questions about the implications of technology in our lives. The rise of social media and government monitoring has sparked debates about privacy and the extent to which individuals are willing to sacrifice their freedoms for security. The parallels between the world of 1984 and contemporary society invite readers to consider the potential consequences of unchecked surveillance.

Atwood's exploration of gender and power dynamics also resonates in today's discourse surrounding women's rights and reproductive autonomy. The resurgence of debates about bodily autonomy and the regulation of women's bodies in various parts of the world reflects the themes present in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood's narrative serves as a cautionary tale, warning against the dangers of patriarchal control and the politicization of women's bodies.

Conclusion

The enduring relevance of George Orwell's 1984 and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* lies in their powerful portrayals of dystopian societies, each warped by authoritarianism and oppression. Both novels explore the dangers posed by unchecked power and the ways in which authoritarian regimes can erode individual freedoms, identities, and the human spirit. By examining the complex interplay between state control and individual resistance, Orwell and Atwood caution readers about the ease with which societies can succumb to tyranny and manipulation.

In 1984, Orwell's vision warns against the psychological and ideological manipulations that a totalitarian regime can wield to maintain dominance. Through the story of Winston's failed rebellion, Orwell explores how language, history, and personal agency can be systematically dismantled, making resistance nearly impossible. The Party's relentless control over thoughts and emotions illuminates the terrifying potential of authoritarian regimes to strip individuals of their humanity.

Similarly, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* illustrates the dangers of a theocratic society where moral absolutism serves as a justification for stripping individuals—especially women—of their autonomy and dignity. By following Offred's journey, Atwood underscores the extent to which authoritarian ideologies can corrupt social institutions, leading to a society that represses its members in the name of purity and order. Offred's resistance, though often internal and subtle, reflects the enduring strength of the human spirit, even in the face of extreme repression.

As contemporary societies face parallel issues—surveillance, misinformation, and rising authoritarianism—these novels serve as cautionary tales for today's readers. The social and political challenges they present underscore the need to remain vigilant against the erosion of personal

freedoms. Orwell and Atwood emphasize that freedom and individuality are not guaranteed but require active protection and awareness. Their works remind us that resistance to oppressive forces often begins with personal courage, the ability to question reality, and the will to hold onto one's identity and autonomy.

Ultimately, *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale* underscore the importance of vigilance in safeguarding freedoms and the need to challenge systems that seek to suppress dissent and homogenize identities. Through their narratives, Orwell and Atwood compel readers to reflect on the role of power in shaping society and to recognize the inherent dangers in allowing any ideology to dominate unchecked. These novels serve as timeless calls to action, reminding us that the fight for truth, freedom, and selfhood is ongoing and demands our continued engagement and resistance.

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