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Analysis of political dystopia in George Orwell and his successors

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V Praze dne

## Abstrakt

Táto práca sa zameriava na diskusiu literárneho žánru politickej dystópie v časovom úseku nasledujúcom po románe George Orwella *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Uskutočnená je analýza dvoch po-orwellovských románov: *This Perfect Day* od Iru Levina a *The Handmaid's Tale* od Margaret Atwoodovej, za účelom zistenia, do akej miery oba romány vychádzajú z orwellovskej tradície. V úvodnej časti sú pojmy "utópia" a "dystópia" preskúmané z historického hľadiska, aby mohlo byť objasnené, na základe akých podmienok mohla z utópie vzniknúť dystópia. Nasledujúca kapitola ukazuje vznik Orwellovho románu *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, závisiaceho od dvoch faktorov: konkrétne historické podmienky povojnovej doby a dystopická literárna tradícia prvej polovice dvadsiateho storočia, do veľkej miery ovplyvnená literárnymi dielami ako "The Machine Stops" od E.M. Forstera, *Brave New World* od Aldousa Huxleyho a *We* od Jevgenija Zamjatina. Táto kapitola sa zaoberá Orwellovou transformáciou týchto faktorov smerom k naplneniu jeho politických a estetických cieľov. Nasledujúca kapitola poskytuje kľúčové rozdelenie medzi termínmi "dystópia" a "anti-utópia", čo sú dva ideologicky rôzne typy dystopického textu. Neskoršie analýzy vybraných románov sa riadia týmto rozdelením, pretože z neho vychádza základné pochopenie významov, tém a motívov vybraných literárnych diel. V nasledujúcich kapitolách sú predstavené romány *The Handmaid's Tale* a *This Perfect Day*, s dôrazom na ich historické pozadie, literárnu hodnotu a mieru inovácie. Podobnosť v motívoch a témach s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* je neprestajne sledovaná za účelom zistenia do akej miery môžu byť tieto romány brané ako výsledok orwellovskej literárnej tradície. Z toho dôvodu dochádza k častým porovnávaniam a odkazom na Orwellov román. Posledné kapitoly sa sústredia na obsiahlejšiu analýzu niektorých konkrétnych tém, ktoré prenikajú všetkými tromi románmi.

Vykonané sú priame porovnávaná dvoch mladších románov s Orwellovým textom za účelom konečného potvrdenia silného vplyvu románu *Nineteen Eighty-Four* na neskoršiu dystopickú tvorbu. Záver sa pokúša načrtnúť niektoré dodatočné myšlienky spojené s vývojom dystópie v dvadsiatom storočí, najmä čo sa týka transformácie politickej dystópie od Orwella k neskorším dielam. Záver tiež rekapituluje základné dôvody pre výber práve *The Handmaid's Tale* a *This Perfect Day* ako právoplatných nositeľov niektorých formálnych a ideologických znakov typických pre *Nineteen Eighty-Four* do druhej polovice dvadsiateho storočia.

## Abstract

The thesis focuses on the discussion of the genre of political dystopia in the period following George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. An analysis of two post-Orwellian novels is attempted: Ira Levin's *This Perfect Day* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, to prove how much they depend on the Orwellian tradition. In the introductory part, the terms "utopia" and "dystopia" are examined from the historical point of view, to elucidate under what conditions the latter term derived from the former one. The following chapter presents the genesis of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as dependent on two factors: the particular historical conditions of the post-war times and the dystopian literary tradition of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century heavily influenced by texts such as "The Machine Stops" by E.M. Forster, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley and *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin. This chapter deals with Orwell's transformations of these factors towards his political and aesthetic goals. The following chapter provides a crucial differentiation between terms "dystopia and anti-utopia", the two ideologically different kinds of dystopian texts. The later analyses of chosen novels adhere to this differentiation because the understanding of the essential meanings and themes are derived largely thereof.

In the following chapters the novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *This Perfect Day* are generally introduced with an emphasis on their historical background and their literary significance and innovation. The resemblance in terms of motifs and themes with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are constantly monitored in order to find to what extent these novels can be treated as results of

the Orwellian literary tradition; thus frequent references to and comparisons with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are made.

The last chapters each focuses on broader analysis of a particular theme which permeates all three novels. Direct comparisons are made between the two examined novels with the Orwell's text to further confirm strong influences of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* on them. The conclusion attempts to express additional ideas related to the development of dystopia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially regarding the transformation of political dystopia from Orwell to later texts. It also recapitulates the main reasons for choosing *The Handmaid's Tale* and *This Perfect Day* as valid carriers of some formal and ideological features typical for *Nineteen Eighty-Four* into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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## Introduction

The topic of my BA Thesis is the analysis of a negative form of utopia called dystopia (or anti-utopia) in three novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century- George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Ira Levin's *This Perfect Day*. I am interested in a portrayal of the political dystopia, therefore all the three novels I chose focus on urban society ruled by some kind of totalitarian government; and my aim is mostly to analyze how exactly and why this government controls its society and restricts the rights of its population. A broader reason for this analysis is my interest in the development of dystopia in 20<sup>th</sup> century which is a century in which dystopian writing outnumbers utopian writing by far. I therefore try to examine the dystopian element of the chosen novels in relation to the historical period in which they were written and I also consider the impulses which might have brought the authors to write them. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by Orwell is probably one of the most famous anti-utopian texts which profoundly helped the development of the dystopian literary genre. I therefore treat this novel as an anchor of my study and direct my focus to the two later novels in which I try to examine the extent to which they follow the Orwellian tradition both formally and ideologically.

Lastly, I try to formally classify the novels into categories such as dystopia and anti-utopia on the basis of the amount of hope, memories and point of view of the narrator. My classification stems from Tom Moylan's differentiation between dystopia and anti-utopia in

his book *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*. Since I am interested in the late development of dystopia, I consider it necessary to begin with a brief historical description of development of literary utopia in which its negative alternative dystopia has its origins.

### Historical development of literary utopia and dystopia

The word utopia was coined by Thomas More in 1516 in his book *Utopia*, in which he describes an island with supposedly ideal society. The word 'utopia' consists of a Greek word *topos*, which means place, and prefix *-u*, which means no or not. Although the essential meaning of the word is hence *nowhere*, over the centuries it has come to refer to a non-existent good place<sup>1</sup>. Even though the term 'utopia' arose only in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, its elements in literature have been present in the Western civilization throughout its literary tradition. It has its stems reaching back to the early classical myths from ancient Greece, Rome, Sumer and early Judaism. The common utopian features of these myths were the creation of earthly paradise where man was close to gods. The gods were in constant connection with the humans and often had favorite ones among them such as in Homer's *Iliad*. There was no birth and no death and the earth spontaneously produced an abundance of food and whatever else people needed, such as in the Garden of Eden. The most influential of these myths are creation myths like the golden age and earthly paradise and myths of the

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<sup>1</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)  
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afterlife such as Hades in the ancient Greek mythology<sup>2</sup> or Heaven in the Judeo-Christian tradition. A particular branch of similar utopian literature written in ancient Greece was pastoral poetry dating back to 700 BC to its probably first representative piece, *Works and Days* by Hesiod. Pastoral in ancient Greek literature referred to a particular mode, expressing humble attitude towards nature, rather than to a genre because over centuries there would have been pastoral poetry, elegy, epic etc. Pastoral poetry such as *Works and Days* was utopian in a sense that people lived peacefully and in complete harmony with nature, which was a lone provider of happiness; its powerful, almost divine essence is in a way reminiscent of Spinoza's pantheism. Life in such conditions was simple and presented no obstacles and happiness was brought by manual labour on farms. Another example is Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which men and nature were so close that nature substituted gods in their role of helpers and punishers.

All the early myths and pastoral literature were important to the development of the western utopian tradition, the founder of which is commonly said to be the great ancient Greek philosopher Plato who portrayed his vision of a utopian society in his famous dialogue, the *Republic*. His utopia was of a completely different kind, though. Contrary to the myths which lay their basis heavily on the connection between gods and humans, Plato describes his utopian society only based on set of rules and hierarchy. His version of utopia and the one by ancient pastoral literature thus present a dichotomy: Plato's utopia is urban, pastoral's is rural. Plato's is a political utopia; its essence lies in the optimal distribution of social and political functions and stratification of society. In ancient Greek pastorals there is no politics or social restrictions; the utopia lies in the simplicity of life arising from the perfect harmony of human and nature. The development of modern utopia owes more to Plato than to pastoral literature.

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<sup>2</sup> Sargent, 13

With the rapid development of urban areas especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the focus of utopian literature has been more on the arrangement of society rather than on the contemplation of nature. Although modern utopias which promote harmony with nature can still be found, as in *Ecotopia* (1975) by Ernest Callenbach, even in this novel the functioning of society and its governmental arrangement is carefully described.

It is noteworthy that probably all political utopias dating back to the first one by Plato might not seem utopian to the modern reader. Due to strict hierarchy in Plato's *Republic* freedom of an individual was considerably restricted, the modern notion of a family was quite non-existent and the children had their future decided for them by others. These elements together with some others such as abolishment of poets and painters create in modern mind a feeling that Plato's society was not really utopian. Similarly, More's Utopian Island would in the modern eyes hardly seem ideal either, with its strict hierarchy and even an ongoing slavery as a punishment for minor offences<sup>3</sup>. It is important to bear in mind that to the contemporary people, living under different conditions, these societies would have seemed truly utopian. It is apparent that while the definition of utopia remains relatively the same since the beginning of the term, its implementation differs from culture to culture and even from generation to generation. H.G. Wells, a well known late 19<sup>th</sup> century utopian writer says in his *A Modern Utopia* (1905): 'There will be many Utopias. Each generation will have its new version...'<sup>4</sup> And, indeed, the various portrayals of utopia over centuries serve as an evidence to the fact that the idea of a particular utopia has its basis in the standards of the society the author lives in, in its limitations and shortcomings.

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<sup>3</sup> Sargent, 23

<sup>4</sup> H.G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* 370

This development of utopia brings together the development of dystopia, too. The very first anti-utopian elements can be traced back to the ancient Greek comedy writer Aristophanes (448-380 BCE). In his *Women in Parliament* there is a new type of government lead by women, which fails because people are not capable of required altruism; and in his play *Plutus*, while the god redistributes wealth to those in need, the human greed rapidly redistributes it again inequitably<sup>5</sup>.

Since Aristophanes until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the most important author to have conveyed some of the anti-utopian views was the well known 18<sup>th</sup> century satirist Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) in his most renowned novel *Gulliver's Travels*. In the fourth book Swift portrays an island where a utopian society is established in which horses are the rational creatures and humans, the Yahoos, are like animals. The island is utopian because there is no disease, vice, no stealing or lying. Through the eyes of the horses, Houyhnhnms, then Swift criticizes human societies for their degrading morality and way of living.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, due to increasing effectiveness of the Industrial Revolution, globalization and geographical discoveries around the world an important change happened regarding the literary portrayal of utopia/dystopia. While writers such as More or Swift believed that there can be a single island, an isolated piece of land, where utopia can be effectively functioning, later writers starting with H.G. Wells and William Morris due to the aforementioned reasons relocated their utopian societies into future, when the process of revolutionary, historical change brought about the utopian society<sup>6</sup>. This trend has been

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<sup>5</sup> Sargent, 18

<sup>6</sup> Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (London:Methuen, Inc, 1986) 6

prevalent ever since, also with Orwell, Atwood and Levin setting their plots in a nearer or more distant future.

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### George Orwell- *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

George Orwell, born Eric Blair in India, 1903, was an English novelist, essayist and journalist who was a witness to many destructive events which took place in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After graduating from high school he went to Burma to work for the British Imperial forces, where he saw the British oppression of the natives and the broken relations between them and the British officers. Orwell despised his position as oppressor and managed later to neatly capture this hostile atmosphere in one of his essays called "Shooting an

Elephant'', published in 1936. The same year Orwell, already a journalist, traveled to Spain to report on the Spanish Civil War, where he witnessed the terrible consequences caused by the rising fascist political regime. Orwell lived during the time of both world wars; he saw the destructive rise of the Spanish Fascism, Russian Communism and German Nazism. Instead of these regimes Orwell, in his essays ''Why I write'' and ''The Lion and the Unicorn'', advocates social democracy, later becoming a member of social democratic Independent Labour Party. Orwell believed that England possessed the power to resist the impending totalitarian regimes, which he expressed also in ''The Lion and the Unicorn'': 'I believe in England, and I believe that we shall go forward'<sup>7</sup>.

In his *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Orwell, instead of hopes for England in the future, expresses the disastrous effects of the aforementioned totalitarian regimes, taken to the extreme. Unlike Orwell's earlier text, the satire *Animal Farm*, which is a criticism of Stalinism only, *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* contains intertwining elements of both extreme left and extreme right political tendency. The reason for criticizing both is because Orwell, in his own words, was aware of 'the perversions to which a centralized economy is liable and which have already been partly realized in Communism and Fascism.'<sup>8</sup> The link with the extreme left is perhaps more clear in the novel: The ideology of the Party is called Ingsoc, the shortage of English socialism. The portrayal of the enigmatic leader Big Brother, glowing from the omnipresent telescreens resembles numerous portraits of Stalin in Soviet Russia and, as Isaac Deutscher writes in his *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky 1929-1940*: 'The fragments of 'The Book' were intended to paraphrase *The Revolution Betrayed* just as Emmanuel Goldstein, Big

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<sup>7</sup> George Orwell, '' The Lion and The Unicorn''. [Project Gutenberg of Australia eBook](http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0300011h.html). Aug. 2003. <<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0300011h.html>>

<sup>8</sup> J.C.Garrett, *Hope and Disillusion* (Christchurch: University of Canterbury Publication, 1984) 57

Brother's antagonist, is modeled on Trotsky.<sup>9</sup> The resemblance is quite clear: Trotsky, as well as Goldstein were first supposed to start the revolution but then increasingly removed from power and designated as the enemy of the state. Orwell himself was a socialist, therefore his criticism was supposed to target mainly the misguided members of the far Left, not the Left as a whole.

The reason for Orwell to write *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was not solely to hyperbolize the existing totalitarian regimes, showing thereby their dangers. In 1949 when the book was first published, German Nazism had already been defeated and the influence of Russian Communism was not yet as strong. What Orwell sought was to examine the very structure of a totalitarian system of government in general, its means and motives. He fulfills this task by often presenting the reader some purely analytical descriptions (such as passages from Goldstein's book), which are unmatched by any other dystopian novel. His profound analytical survey through psychological and political approaches to a totalitarian regime is one of the greatest contributions of the novel and may have been serving as a very helpful resource to later utopian/dystopian writers up to the present day.

In his essay "Why I Write" Orwell says: 'Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understand it.'<sup>10</sup> Orwell's literary effort justifies this statement very well. He wrote clearly with an aim to criticize and warn against the existing totalitarian regimes but also, his more general goal was to reject the utopia which these governments tried to achieve and which he, from his own experience, recognized to be impossible. *Nineteen*

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<sup>9</sup> Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky 1929- 1940* (London: Verso Books, 2003) 261

<sup>10</sup> George Orwell, "Why I Write" Project Gutenberg of Australia eBook. Aug. 2003. <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0300011h.html>

*Eighty-Four* is an eloquent example of this effort since it analyzes the very core of the idea of utopia as presented by the ruling Party. While some readers perceive the novel as a prophecy towards what the foreseeable future is going to look like according to Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is by many seen more as a satirical account of contemporary standardization and dehumanization by taking to the extreme all the oppressive concepts of totalitarian governments as perceived by Orwell. Whether *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a prophecy or a satire, it has been subject to several criticisms, mostly due to the hopelessness of its own nightmarish world. Gaylord LeRoy in his 1950 essay on Orwell "A.F. 632 to 1984" writes that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is 'an exercise in disbelief and disillusionment that serves no progressive purpose. It closes in on itself, as it presents no practical alternative to its fearful vision of a pneumatic utopia.'<sup>11</sup> Le Roy states a valid point that it would be very difficult to try to extract from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* an idea of 'what should be done' to prevent a totalitarian government of this sort. One could probably reconcile with this criticism by realization that the novel presents an ideological warning whose impact is by the lack of direction as to how to escape the dystopia once it has taken place in no way diminished. Even if this lack of direction causes the book to lose much of its political importance (with which Orwell would surely disagree), the literary importance as one of the most prominent and thorough portrayal of utopia-gone-wrong is undisputable.

I do not think *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is meant to be taken as a prophecy, but should this be the case, the novel can very easily be exposed to unfair criticism, such as that presented in J.C. Garrett's short book *Hope Or Disillusion*. Garrett first states that the novel should be read as a prophecy because of its title. On the basis of this assumption he goes on to criticize many aspects of the society in the novel which by the actual year 1984 had not happened. For

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<sup>11</sup> Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2000) 123

instance, the ruling Party in Oceania strongly resembles the extreme Left which did not take over by 1984. Another example: Orwell's Newspeak, continually implemented by the Party is a concept which reduces the amount of words to the necessary minimum, hence the amount of thoughts, whereby the Party eliminates ideas which could undermine its absolute power. While in Orwell's fictional reality Newspeak is already quite developed, in reality by the year 1984 the vocabulary of the English language had immensely enhanced. I think that this criticism is misguided if its ambition is to target the quality of the novel as such. At best it shows the failure of the novel as a prophecy but, as R. Carter and V. Durow point out in the introduction to the Penguin Edition of the novel, 'the title most likely derives from a reversal of the last two numbers of the year (1948) in which it was written, rather than to think of the book as Orwell's prophecy.'<sup>12</sup>

Taking into account numerous views and criticisms of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it would perhaps be reasonable to understand it as a satire which exaggerates the exploitative elements of contemporary totalitarian powers which Orwell feared might ideologically invade also his beloved country. He expressed this by shifting the despotic government from Russia and Germany to the heart of his own country.

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is one of a few most renowned and influential dystopian novels of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, together with *We* (1924) by Yevgeny Zamyatin and *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley, both of which Orwell read and was inspired by.

One of the first political dystopias, *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin, presents a totalitarian city, The One State, which maintains a complete conformity of its citizens by means of general brainwashing, enforcement of routine and reduction of creativity, spatial freedom and

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<sup>12</sup> Ronald Carter, Valerie Durow, *Introduction to 1984* by G. Orwell (London: Penguin Student Edition, 2000) vii

even names. Among the crowd one individual, D-503, comes to realize the inhumanity of the totalitarian forces of the government and strives to work against it. This kind of a clash between an individual and a totalitarian government was taken up by Orwell who applied this baseline idea into his own context. In both cases the government's forces are militant and open to severe punishments for the non-conformists. *Brave New World* lacks this element of militantism and so does "The Machine Stops", therefore *We* has to be considered a major influence to *Nineteen-Eighty Four*.

Aldous Huxley, born in 1894 in Surrey, England, was raised by the family of scientists and biologists.<sup>13</sup> It seems quite ironical that his most famous novel deals with the dystopian future of technocratic society and genetically developed offspring. *Brave New World* includes several topics which are present also in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: mainly it is a clash between a 'normal', morally intact individual and the restrictive, totalitarian society. The society is in both cases the one in which 'people will be conditioned, standardized and dehumanized; past will have been obliterated; reading and thinking will be suspect activities and individuality a crime.'<sup>14</sup> *Brave New World* focuses less on the political power of the society and more on the biological and psychological misuse of technical development. Children, for instance, are fertilized in specially designed receptacles and then artificially incubated. Before their 'birth' it is decided how much abilities and intellectual powers they will be given, based on which they receive predestined roles in the World State. The concept of a family is broken, but sexual relations are maintained by encouragement of promiscuity. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, on the contrary, the mask of a family life is present, although only as a part of a control-system, but sexual pleasure is intentionally forbidden. In general, in both novels a

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<sup>13</sup> Huxley's grandfather was the well-known Thomas Henry Huxley, a biologist who promoted Darwin's evolutionary theories

<sup>14</sup> Gaylord C. LeRoy, "A.F. 632 to 1984" *College English* Dec. 1950: 135

standardizing force is being implemented: In *Brave New World* it is pleasure- besides promiscuity there is soma, the sedative drug, and feelies, a form of a motion picture providing an additional sensation of touch; in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* it is fear and terror. The frequent executions, vaporizing, Thought Police and omnipresent telescreens are the elements which prevent any trace of individuality. The biggest difference perhaps is that the order in *Brave New World* stands to reason; it is a science and technology-driven society. In Orwell's novel the Party attacks the very reason by doublethink, slogans such as Slavery is Freedom or War is Peace; and by the baseline idea that reality is determined by the way minds of the masses are shaped.

Nevertheless, in his novel Orwell displays a similar outline of the dystopian society as Huxley: both describe totalitarian societies to which all the members are helplessly subordinate; both are very inhuman in their manipulation of the individual; both implement clever methods of control (fear; pleasure) and engage its members in meaningless ceremonies to keep them in conformity (Two Minutes of Hate; Solidarity Service). It is only then that the novels part due to different goals they aim at. While Huxley criticizes the danger of the misuse of technical development and devaluating naturalness of life, showing that 'when the object of desire is achieved easily, it loses its value,'<sup>15</sup> *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is rather a result of the two decades before it was written- the rise and disastrous effects of totalitarian political regimes in Europe.

But well before Zamyatin's critique of the Soviet state, Huxley's critique of consumer capitalism and cautionary despair in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the modernist writer E.M. Forster wrote against the grain of an emergent modernity.<sup>16</sup> His short story "The

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<sup>15</sup> Le Roy, 136

<sup>16</sup> Moylan; 111

Machine Stops'', published in 1909 uses several techniques and approaches to a dystopian text which become standardized and are in various ways reflected not only by Orwell and his contemporaries but also later in the works of Margaret Atwood and Ira Levin.

Forster's short story portrays a gloomy future in which every aspect of human life has lost most of its humanity and is completely standardized and mechanized by 'the Machine' which is a worldwide, all-controlling computer system. It not only sustains every dimension of people's daily life but also manages the standardization of their person<sup>17</sup>. In this way some of the ideas of 'the Machine' are later reflected in Unicomp, a giant computer which determines the lives of people in Levin's *This Perfect Day*. In ''The Machine Stops'' the surface of earth is no longer populated and people live underground in separate cells, which they have no reason to leave; everything they need for living they receive from the Machine.

One of the consequences of the machine-governed life is its thorough uniformity. Every day is like the other, people communicate, study and teach their meaningless ideas through (a very prophetic) version of the internet; spatial movement is increasingly despised, hopes and passions are dulled, plans for the future nonexistent. People live with a dangerously passive idea that this is how life is supposed to be. The portrayal of uniformity is important for the development of dystopia because it is one of the means the totalitarian governments will use to keep control over the population in later political dystopias. In ''The Machine Stops'' we do not know anything about the government over the Machine, whether it is human-based like in *This Perfect Day*, or a self sustaining computer system. In many of the later dystopias, though, we are lead to understand the government and its oppressing forces quite clearly and uniformity is almost always one of their highest goals. Its implementation can be at least partly achieved by various means: totally restricting personal freedom like in

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<sup>17</sup> Moylan 111

*The Handmaid's Tale*, or to a lesser extent by constant monitoring of daily life such as by telescreens in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, or by chip bracelets in *This Perfect Day*; by imposing names to the individuals in the form of consecutive numbers like in *We* or *This Perfect Day*; imposing the 'owners' name such as in *The Handmaid's Tale*; or often simply diminishing the number of possible names such as in *Brave New World* or *This Perfect Day*.

An important element which has a great impact on later dystopian texts is the counter-narrative presented in the story. A counter-narrative in a dystopian text usually focuses on a member of the society who for various reasons does not share the ideals and values promoted by the society and seeks escape or a militant upheaval. In "The Machine Stops" it is Kuno, who sees the degradation and dehumanization of the machine-controlled life and knows that there are the 'Homeless' who are able to live on the surface; in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* it is Winston and Julia, the misfits of the totalitarian society and committers of thought crime, who seek the underground resistance called the Brotherhood; in *The Handmaid's Tale* it is Offred, an exploited handmaid who strives to find the Mayday rebellion; and in *This Perfect Day* it is Chip, who, due to his unique rebellious nature becomes 'uncured' and prepares with other uncured a military attack on the very heart of the society- the Unicom. The extent to which the horizons of hope, mainly the existence of and access to the rebellions such as Mayday or the Brotherhood is ensured by the counter-narrative protagonists, determines then where the text is in the spectrum between the two poles- dystopia and anti-utopia. I will distinguish between these two categories in the following chapter.

### Dystopia and Anti-utopia

Hardly any author of a dystopian text describes his or her book strictly as a pessimistic dystopia, utopian dystopia, critical dystopia etc. The reason is that the reader response to a novel written with the utopian or dystopian strategy is very important. Some readers might find a described society better than their own or might happen to share its values whereby the society would seem to them as utopian, regardless what the author had originally intended. It is therefore necessary to find an objective set of features of dystopian novels on the basis of which they could be categorized. The distinction between utopia and dystopia is quite clear from the overall mood of the text but also there is a formal feature which can usually differentiate between them: that is, whether the society is seen from the outside (utopia) or from the inside (dystopia). In other words, usually in utopias the focalizer is a character who is not part of the society and is only introduced to it (e.g. *Gulliver's Travels*, *Women on the Edge of Time*), while in dystopias the focalizer tends to be the member of the society who begins to see its mistakes. A similar objective set of rules, but more universal have to be found for the distinction between different kinds of dystopias. As Tom Moylan suggests (in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*), the distinctions can be made based on a relation between the narrative and counter-narrative of a text, in order to 'track the manner in which its textual novum generates internal innovation in and through its narrative trajectories and ending.'<sup>18</sup> The reader understands the nature of dystopia from the position of a counter narrative, that is, the revolting individual, against the general narrative, the functioning of the society. The main distinction, thus, in Moylan's words is

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<sup>18</sup> Moylan; 156

between the limit case of an open dystopia that retains a utopian commitment at the core of its formally pessimistic presentation and a closed one that abandons the textual ambiguity of dystopian narrative for the absolutism of an anti-utopian stance<sup>19</sup>

Moylan calls the dystopia with a utopian commitment 'dystopia' and the latter one 'anti-utopia'. Although the meanings of these terms vary through academic articles, I am going to retain Moylan's distinction. Dystopia shares with anti-utopia the element of the general narrative which focuses on seemingly the worst possible society with lack of freedom, totalitarian government etc. Textually a pure dystopia, though, approaches this scenario with a utopian perspective (or from a utopian stance) while a pure anti-utopia behaves to the premise completely pessimistically without allowing a trace of hope. The reason is that dystopia is usually written with an aim to criticize some social element while anti-utopias tackle the very definition and essence of utopia. The way dystopia and anti-utopia express their attitude towards the idea of utopia is through the counter-narrative and the amount of hope involved within it. In dystopias, although the main character lives in the worst of societies, he or she is nevertheless determined to either escape or fight it and the hope for succeeding is present throughout. This hope can be expressed by several means: the underground rebellion by means of which the ruling government can be overruled, as Mayday is in *The Handmaid's Tale* and The Brotherhood in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; by the way of escape from the society: In *The Handmaid's Tale* Gilead borders with Canada, which is the utopian horizon, because it serves as a reachable aim for the refugees; in *This Perfect Day* it is Majorca, which is one of the last places on Earth not controlled by The Family (although this is disputable and will be a topic of later chapters). In older dystopias such as *We* by Zamyatin and *Brave New World* by

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<sup>19</sup> Moylan; 156

Huxley there are utopian elements suggesting there is a place other than the dystopian society and that in that place a normal life continues. In *We* there are savages living behind the city walls and in *Brave New World* there are reservations made for such savages outside the 'modern' cities. Thus, dystopias show the worst societies but at the same time they make a statement that this can change in some way and everything can be better. An important message carried in this statement is often that it is the pure and inherently good human nature which can bring about these changes. Thus it seems that the element of the actual dystopia presented in the text serves as a means of promoting human nature and its abilities: resistance, will to survival etc. This is the reason why novels on this side of the dystopian-anti-utopian spectrum are said to be the utopian dystopias. Of course, a novel or a short story can be at any point along this spectrum and very few are radical dystopias or anti-utopias.

Anti-utopias, on the other hand, refuse the protagonist any hopes for escape, or change. The counter-narrative does not represent any power or seed of a successful rebellion. Anti-utopia rejects the very idea of utopia by showing no escape from the 'bad place'. Unlike dystopia in which the essence of utopia may lie in the collective effort of a resistance, anti-utopia 'fails (or chooses not) to challenge the ideological and epistemological limits of the actually existing society'<sup>20</sup>. Anti-utopia thus remains pessimistic and hopeless throughout, with an intention to show that utopia is impossible within the ideological frame of the ruling political regime; or more generally, within the accessible conditions of life in the given environment. From the literary point of view, there may be another difference between utopia and anti-utopia, as spotted by Peter Fitting in his "Impulse of Genre or Neither?" He suggests that 'a possible distinction between dystopia and anti-utopia might lie in seeing the

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<sup>20</sup> Moylan; 156

former in terms of setting and the latter in terms of plot.<sup>21</sup> This is to say that a dystopian text with a utopian horizon tends to use more the general and objective outlook on the society, spotting thereby mistakes of its function, weaknesses, perhaps foreign lands beyond its borders which could serve as a utopian horizon. A focus on the setting may result in describing the dystopian society also in terms of its temporality, showing that it was not everlasting and at one point ended- that would be a temporal utopian horizon. This element exactly is what contributed to seeing *The Handmaid's Tale* as more of a dystopian novel - the epilogue in which Gilead, already a matter of the past, is discussed solely out of academic concern.

In contrast, anti-utopian texts tend to prefer linear plot with focalization remaining within its boundaries. In other words, from anti-utopian texts the reader hardly receives a global or objective picture of society and knows only what is fed to the individual who is helplessly stuck inside it. Within this linear plot no successful breakaway or upheaval occurs and even if the reigning regime is vulnerable in some way, the possibility of taking advantage of it (accessible in a dystopian text) would never be at disposal to the protagonist in a strictly anti-utopian novel.

Relating the aforementioned distinction to the three novels I chose to analyze, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is an exemplary piece of anti-utopian literature and *This Perfect Day*, while sharing many features with Orwell's novel, is the most dystopian of all three novels, although not completely. *The Handmaid's Tale* is somewhere between them, with a sophisticated epilogue being a very complicating element adding features of both dystopia and anti-utopia.

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Fitting, "Impulse of Genre or Neither" *Science-fiction studies*, July 1995: 281

*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, with its expressive hopelessness and 'the brooding, faded, shabby, cruel and paranoid society presided over by Big Brother and the Inner Party is the quintessence of the bad place in our time.'<sup>22</sup> All of the few positive elements of the lives of the main characters are defeated at the end for the sake of uniformity and the ultimate victory of the Party. Orwell made sure that none of the traces of hope or resistance present in the novel can survive the end of the plot.

There is an opposition embodied in the counter-narrative of the novel, namely the relationship between Winston Smith and Julia. Although they lived all their lives under the reign of the Party, their moral integrity and sense of resistance seem to be intact even after so many years. The weakness of this counter-narrative lies in the fact that every positive part of their relationship is either eventually crushed by the Party or simply unimportant in relation to the actual act of resistance. Neither do their meetings at the countryside or in the room above the shop bring any hope for the future, only a momentary relief. They strive to contact the shadowy Brotherhood but they know that their hope of success is very dubious, almost non-existent. It is highly probable that they will be caught made to confess and executed. The only hope that seems to persist (even in the reader) is that their inner nature will remain intact and that their relationship, the sincere affection for each other is untouchable before the Party. This is the reason why the Room 101 is a climax of the novel in that it means an ultimate defeat for them as free individuals and turns the novel towards the anti-utopian end of the spectrum. Winston becomes truly conformed, not only dulled like members of the Family in *This Perfect Day*, or kept prisoner like the Handmaids in Margaret Atwood's novel. There is nothing remaining in Winston at the end but true love for Big Brother which means an utter victory of the totalitarian government over an individual.

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<sup>22</sup> Moylan; 161

The problem with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is, again, its complete and closed anti-utopian stance devoid of any trace of direction or hope. Orwell famously said: 'I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily will arrive, but I believe that it could arrive.'<sup>23</sup> These words seem contrastive to the overall nature of the novel because they suggest that Orwell tried to give grounds for the readers to realize what might be coming in the future so that they could work to avert it. But, as T. Moylan notices: *Nineteen Eighty-Four* circles around in a critical account of mythic closure in a seemingly endless present rather than offering an open-ended parable with a utopian horizon that might provoke political awareness.<sup>24</sup> And, indeed, this may be seen as a shortcoming of the novel since it does not offer any solution whatsoever, in contrast for instance with *Brave New World*, in which the criticism is aimed at the consumerist nature of society and the misuse of the technological development. (Therefore it is clear what has to be done- one should become less obsessed with technological progress and focus more on true value in people) In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the criticism is aimed at the totalitarian Party, but as its representative O'Brien reveals to Winston: 'The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake'<sup>25</sup> - this is, obviously, a closed, impenetrable circle.

There is one slight trace of hope in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, though. It is the unusual ending of the novel - the Newspeak Appendix, an element which Margaret Atwood was surely inspired by when writing the Historical Notes in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The Newspeak Appendix is a strange report of Newspeak, the official language of Oceania. It is an analysis of its different wordings, alphabetical categories, shortages etc. It is analytical, impersonal, written in past tense and most importantly, written from an outside perspective (not a Party's

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<sup>23</sup> Moylan; 162

<sup>24</sup> Moylan, 163

<sup>25</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen-Eighty Four* (London: Penguin Student Edition, 2000) 238

propaganda), inducing the idea that there was an end to the Party after all and that the Appendix was written by some scholar in a future time, interested in the functioning of the past regime.

### Ira Levin- *This Perfect Day*

Ira Levin (1929-2007) was an American novelist and dramatist, whose most creative period was between 1950s and the second half of 1970s. All of his novels of this period became best-sellers and almost all of them, including his play *Deathtrap*, were turned into successful films. His most renowned novels are *Rosemary's Baby* (1967) and *The Stepford Wives* (1972), both of which were successfully adapted into movies by the Hollywood cinema. Levin's style of writing can be described in a positive way as 'best selling', because it is brisk, his pace usually quick (much quicker than Orwell's or Atwood's) and he focuses a lot on the action, which is usually built up around an original and clever concept, which is a common feature of many of his novels, including *This Perfect Day*.

*This Perfect Day* (1970) continues the Orwellian dystopian tradition of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Levin describes a technocratic, totalitarian government presiding globally over the earthly population who call themselves 'The Family'. The story begins in the late 22<sup>nd</sup> century, in the year 141 after the 'The Unification'. The Family is ruled over by a vast computer system called the UniComp, which has every information about each 'member' of The Family stored

in its memory banks. On the basis of this information the UniComp decides about every aspect of their lives: from the everyday details such as whether they can enter certain facilities or take holidays, to decisions about the field of their study, their job and even whether they are to reproduce.

The main feature of The Family is uniformity; every member on Earth wears the exactly same looking 'coveralls', eats 'totalcakes' and drinks cokes. Their lives are saturated with routine - every day looks like the other. The range of names have been severely reduced to names such as Bob, Li, Jesus, Anna, Peace (reminiscent of *Brave New World*) and every member has a 'nameber' which is an identification number that is a part of their name. There is only one global language used by The Family and the genetical engineering has improved to such an extent that there is only one worldwide race. The World is now a peaceful place with complete absence of violence and the members of The Family are content living under a totalitarian rule of the UniComp, all for the following reason which is also the most important means of maintaining conformity in The Family: the members undergo monthly 'treatments', which is a sort of vaccination consisting of a mixture of tranquilizers, contraceptives and other elements, causing the members to be conformed, content, faithful to The Family, and to lose the critical edge of self-awareness. When the members are 62 years old, there is an additional poison added into the mixture which gradually kills them. The members think this is a natural way of life. 'There is no warfare in the world of the Family; there is also no poverty. Nor is there any originality or creativity. Nor is there any passion.'<sup>26</sup> Neither is there need for police, army, or politicians, but there is another kind of profession: adviser - an overly caring psychologist who constantly monitors mental health of the members, their subordination and conformity. He is essentially a tool of the UniComp to maintain control, eliminate any shred

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<sup>26</sup> Jeff Riggenschach, 'Ira Levin and *This Perfect Day*' Ludwig von Mises Institute Dec. 2010  
<http://mises.org/daily/4866>

of doubt in the members and to spot traces of misbehavior or unconformity. In terms of the advisers' latter task they are to some extent similar to the Thought Police or the Eyes, with one crucial difference: the advisers do not need to be secret or hidden because the society is dulled anyway, unlike those in the two other novels.

If the conformation in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is achieved by fear and in *Brave New World* by pleasure, in *This Perfect Day* it would be by dullness. The members are unable to feel any shade of aggressiveness or anger, not to mention any urge to rebellion. The society is saturated with unnaturally created altruism where everyone cares about the well being of others, which, in other words, is harmony with the UniComp.

In a certain sense this life filled with everyday routine where everyone is nevertheless happy, smiling and overly selfless is a variation of the grotesquely positive yet black and white spirit of the town Pleasantville<sup>27</sup>. Individuality and originality is unknown in Pleasantville and the exaggerated everyday routine and a non-existent outlook build the black and white cage of the seemingly utopian town. Both societies are ideologically closed in themselves, suggesting no potential development or change; Pleasantville moreover metaphorically transforms the ideological closeness to a spatial one; in both societies the citizens have very limited (or none) options of profession and free time activities. Even vulgarisms are in both cases covered up by words or phrases which sound rather infantile as vulgarisms– in the case of *The Family* it is the words 'fight' and 'hate'. The groovy life of the members, caught up in the circle of routine and unawaringly enforced obedience is captured well in the black and white essence of Pleasantville.

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<sup>27</sup> A 1998 American movie about a black and white TV series called Pleasantville, which presents a grotesque but seemingly utopian town of the 1950s

Although members of The Family know that all their decisions are made for them, they do not understand how it could be otherwise. They have a misguided idea of freedom, nicely expressed in the conversation between the 'uncured' Chip and his adviser Bob. Chip argues that 'freedom of' things like violence and wars has nothing to do with the actual freedom, which is in fact supposed to be 'freedom to'. For Bob though, 'freedom of' is the freedom he defends because since he never experienced 'freedom to', it is a vacant notion for him.

This society is, unlike the one in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, not a straightforward dystopia, but rather a false utopia, such as the one in the movie *The Matrix*, where an illusory utopia is pulled over the eyes of the people and the true dystopian nature of the society is revealed only to the individual who has somehow escaped the barriers of the illusion. The Family in *This Perfect Day* is a two-layered society: content and happiness fills the general narrative of the text while despair and anger fills the counter-narrative, the culture of resistance of the 'uncured' individuals. In comparison, the reader would look in vain for traces of happiness or content in any part of Gilead or Oceania. This is of course not evidence that The Family is a more utopian dystopia than the other two societies; it is merely an indication of a different technique implemented by Levin to maintain his society in conformity. What strongly differentiates utopia from dystopia is not elimination of happiness but elimination of humanity- which is to a great extent implemented in *This Perfect Day*.

It has been said that in the spectrum of dystopia on one side and anti-utopia on the other, *This Perfect Day* would be the most dystopian novel from the three that I have chosen. This is largely determined by the position of the counter-narrative, which is the story of the awakening of Chip, his escape from The Family and eventually his militant voyage to destroy the UniComp, which at the very end turns out to be successful.

It would be fair to say that *This Perfect Day* promotes to a large extent the virtuous character of human nature, which is represented by Chip. He is strong, self-confident, resisting, resolved, passionate, loving and willing to sacrifice anything for freedom. Most importantly though, he is a symbol of an undying will for individuality: ever since his childhood conversations with his (also) non-conformist grandfather, he subconsciously feels that there is something important in the ideas of wanting and choosing things by himself, which are essential features of individuality. The question whether his strong will for individuality and freedom comes only from the influence of his grandfather (who suggested that he try to wish for things, want things), or also from his genetical predispositions (symbolically, his eyes are of different colours), remains unanswered.

If we look only at the position of counter-narrative in context with the narrative, we may find that *This Perfect Day* is a very good example of a utopian dystopia, which, just to be reminded, is a type of dystopia, in which the negative, inhuman aspects of society serve as an opportunity to promote humanity and individuality, which eventually prevail. Chip discovers that The Family does not rule over all the Earth, there are islands left free, resided by the 'incurables' who supposedly live freely in a society which to an awakened member of The Family must seem a utopia. Chip manages to flee to one of these islands, Mallorca, with Lilac, the woman he loves and has awakened from the life dulled by treatments. After having acclimatized, Chip builds up a team armed with bombs to go back to the heart of the UniComp to blow it up. The ending of the novel brings the very end of The Family since Chip, after many difficulties, manages to set explosions to the memory banks of the UniComp and flee back to his wife and child.

There are two instances that undermine the utopian tendency in *This Perfect Day* making it a complicated utopian dystopia. The first one is the idea the reader gets from the

first parts of the novel, namely that it is actually about the fight between the man and the machine, between humanity and radical inhumanity. The fact is, though, that the UniComp is being controlled and programmed by a secret community of untreated people, many of whom have similar background as Chip himself. The UniComp knows of all the planned attacks from the free islands because always there is a 'shepherd' in the team, who is a double agent, working for the UniComp and who deliberately leads them to a trap. The members of the team are then recruited as programmers of the UniComp because the fact that they managed to escape The Family and then came back and reached its headquarters in an effort to sabotage it, shows their ability, talent and wit. The UniComp needs such people as the new generation of programmers who would make important decisions about the world society.

These programmers are the closed ruling class living untreated and in luxury with their life span reaching to however long it can. Their comfortable life style reminds one of the conditions of life of O'Brien, the member of the Inner Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. He, too, lived in luxury, compared with the rest of the society. Winston, for instance, drank wine for the first time in his life in O'Brien's place, and O'Brien could also turn off the telescreen any time he wished which showed superiority towards ordinary citizens like Winston and towards the system itself, similar to the programmers in *This Perfect Day*. This similarity lays in the criticism of Communism which both novels share. While Orwell was preoccupied with the fact that the ruling government can gather all the wealth and stay outside the laws they enforce while severely under-delivering to people, keeping them poor and weak; Levin pointed to the misguided concept of Communism that everyone with no exception can live equally. The members of The Family really are all equal but Levin shows that there has to be somebody ruling over the computer itself and that somebody has to, for its own purposes, live undulled, educated and in considerably better conditions than the masses. *This Perfect Day*

thus presents a fight between people and other people, with the result leaning (unnecessarily, I think) towards the utopian direction.

The second reason why this novel should not be granted a wholly utopian perspective is the situation in the free island Mallorca into which much hope is given by Chip. His success in reaching the island has been deliberately allowed and what he finds on it is much different from his expectations. First of all, UniComp has been a step ahead throughout the course of Chip's efforts to flee to Mallorca. Islands such as this have been deliberately left free for the non-conformist members to escape to, so that 'the computer doesn't have to weed the bad ones; they do the weeding themselves. They wiggle their way happily into the nearest isolation ward.'<sup>28</sup> This realization somewhat trivializes Chip's great efforts to escape The Family, in which the reader was ready to find a great deal of inspiring humanity, confidence and resolution. 'I thought I was being so fighting clever!' <sup>29</sup> observes Chip in disappointment.

Furthermore, the society of Mallorca presents a harsh reality of a capitalistic society which, to its own despair, is completely cut out from the outer world. Levin, while criticizing Communism on the basis of individuality now shows the dark side of Capitalism in which he criticizes individuality for its incompetence to build a functioning society. Mallorca is a capitalistic society with market economy and class system where the few rich own large capital and the poor work in manual labor and have barely enough money to afford a single room to live in. While The Family is a science fictional place of the future, Mallorca is deliberately portrayed as a present time society with all its usual evils. People are money-centered due to having to take care of themselves; there is hatred, greed, insecurity, violence

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<sup>28</sup> Ira Levin, *This Perfect Day* (New York: Pegasus, 2010) 213

<sup>29</sup> Levin, 213

and poverty; there is dirt, pain, lack of compassion and hardly any perspective for improvement.

The difference between the world of *The Family* and Mallorca is that while *The Family* is a dystopian society, Mallorca is neither dystopian nor utopian, because its society is a result of a spontaneous socio-historical development instead of an artificially created project. Yet, by mostly negative descriptions of Mallorca, Levin seems to make some sort of statement. It could be an indication that there is some validity after all in the choice (and manner) of *The Family* to enforce some rules on its members and to deprive them of some freedoms. That would be because the reader, together with Chip, after having been exposed to all the evils of *The Family*, anticipates something much better in Mallorca. There is a barely better social situation on the island, though, but the reader realizes that he or she could hardly wish for one since Mallorca's society is simply a reflection of our own. This could be meant as a reminder that *The Family* might not be that much worse than our own society after all. Chip complained about the lack of freedom while living in *The Family* but the freedom he can enjoy in Mallorca can hardly be described as considerably better and neither can be the overall level of life. After these speculations one has to wonder what the cost of freedom is and whether it is really more important than a convenient and happy, though dulled life. Within a textual level, the bad conditions of Mallorca may to some extent even justify the harsh principles *The Family* works by.

Thus, in spite of the happy ending, a question remains: What now? If *The Family* should awaken to a society such as the one in Mallorca, it would mean a completely non-utopian ending altogether. Levin cleverly exposes the true nature of what seems to be the only alternative to dystopia of *The Family*- the one which is in many ways even less satisfactory. An observant reader should not finish *This Perfect Day* with the feeling of relief but with an

apprehensive thought: what would happen if the world should become a dire place like Mallorca? Would it not be then sensible for people to rationally decide to go back to the UniComp and treatments?

Formally, then, *This Perfect Day* is a continuation of the Orwellian tradition in that it describes an effort of an individual to enforce his individuality against the oppressive state. It takes its position at the more dystopian side of the dystopia-anti-utopia continuum because the counter-narrative of the individual prevails over the narrative of the state to such an extent that the state exists no more after the end of the novel. Outside of the plot of the novel the doubt towards the potentiality of utopia persists on, unanswered.

### Margaret Atwood- *The Handmaid's Tale*

The 1960s and 1970s were in the US the decades that brought about many changes regarding gender, racial and civil rights movements. Starting with the hippie 'sit ins', protesting against the political authority and the Vietnam War, the period of the 'culture decade' (as the sixties became to be known) was about to witness the rise of the second feminist movement, gay movement, African American civil rights movement etc.

Before the 1960s the stereotypical place for women was at the household raising a child and doing work around the house and they were refused certain jobs and professions. This was found discriminating by Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, created

by John F. Kennedy in 1961. This gave way to a number of legal reforms catalyzed by street marches, protests, social debates and feminist literature. In 1963 an immensely popular book, *Feminine Mystique*, written by Betty Friedan, was published and in 1966 the National Organization for Women was founded. The growing power of feminism, based on the constant presence in the media and on the streets continued to the beginning of the 1970s. A great success was achieved in 1973: a reform in law was made by the Supreme Court, namely the constitutionalization of the right to abortion, which brought much political attention to the feminist movement.

The strength of the second wave of the feminist movement since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1981 was on its decline. The religious conservatives of the New Right movement criticized many aspects of the liberal 1960s including the 'sexual revolution' of the hippies as well as political equality between women and men promoted by the feminists. 'An example of an attempt to deradicalize feminism was the threat to draft women, which was put forward by members of the New Right.<sup>30</sup> In this conservative revival of the West the second wave of the feminist movement found it hard to push through its ideas, failing mainly to ensure the ratification of the Equal Right Amendment to the US Constitution in 1982. This period of time with regards to the feminist movement weakened by fundamentalist and conservative political groups is referred to as the 'backlash' of the 1980s.

In this somewhat anti-feminist political atmosphere the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) was written by the Canadian author Margaret Atwood, which expressed fears of the feminists of losing the accomplishments achieved in the 1960s. It would probably be right to analyze this novel in a twofold way- on the one hand as a piece of feminist writing having

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Zillah Eisenstein, "Antifeminism in the Politics and Election of 1980" *Feminist Studies* Summer 1981: 193

political connotations and importance to its contemporary times and on the other hand as an innovative continuation of the dystopian literary genre, being of great importance to its development in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The story of the novel is set in the near future in a theocratic and totalitarian society called Gilead, which was built on the ruins of the former United States by a militant group of Christian fundamentalists, whose moral and ideological framework is an exaggeration of what resembles a deformed version of the New Right movement. The society of Gilead presents quite an opposite value system to the one which the second wave of feminist movement active throughout the 1960s and 1970s tried to build. Women have completely lost their freedom and they have been assigned roles in society on the basis of their age and fertility. The young and fertile women who have in some way broken the strict Christian law such as divorce, different sexual orientation or extra marital relationships are devoid of all possession including their own name and are ascribed the function of Handmaids - women who live with the elite Commanders - the high ranked men, simply to give children to them and their infertile Wives. The function of Handmaids was created to bolster an extremely low birthrate which is a result of pollution, toxic waste etc. Other categories of women are Marthas - the house servants, Aunts - the class of women meant to indoctrinate the Handmaids with the beliefs of the society and to prepare them for their later use; Econowives - the infertile women married to middle class men; Wives - the infertile, official spouses of the Commanders, whose 'genetic sterility works so well as a metaphor for the death culture modernity has produced'<sup>31</sup>.

As has been said, the achievements of the feminist movement in the late 70s are quite non-existent in the society of Gilead; it is rather to the contrary. Women, especially the Handmaids, are forbidden to read or write or express loudly thoughts against the regime.

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<sup>31</sup> Moylan; 164

From the very beginning when they are being trained by the Aunts they have lost their freedom to decide about their fates. They are assigned to a Commander and then reassigned, quite independent of their own will. The punishment for trespass is death or banishment to the Colonies with the 'Unwomen' - a place mainly for political prisoners, resembling working camps of the Second World War, where the prisoners work hard with dangerous, radioactive materials until they die. The spatial freedom of the Handmaids is also harshly restricted. The Handmaids can move around only on certain designated areas, which are watched over by the armed guards. There is a secret police force called the Eyes who work for the government of Gilead and are deployed undercover among the people. The Eyes are similar to the Thought Police of the *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: their task is to spot any sign of the ideological treason among the citizens. The very secretive and obscure manner in which Offred and Ofglen are exchanging information on the street is reminiscent of the way Winston and Julia have to communicate, afraid of the Thought Police and the telescreens.

Regarding the political connotations of the novel, it is a brisk reaction to the dire times of the 1980s. The protesters of the previous two decades were questioning worth of their own efforts and Atwood writes from the same perspective, 'having seen in the 1960s and 1970s the false utopias of big states and big ideas yield their power to the grassroots utopian opposition of popular movements'<sup>32</sup>. When discussing her own attitude expressed by the novel towards political situation she was writing in, it is important to look at where the novel stands in the spectrum between dystopia and anti-utopia.

The difficulty about this task lies in the considerable amount of ambiguity present in many elements of the novel. The actual plot is not so closed as in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, there are certain streams of valuable information accessible to the main character Offred and her

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<sup>32</sup> Moylan, 164

many flashbacks into the past which reveal a great deal of general information about the situation in Gilead. Based on this the reader comes to understand that the general situation with Gilead and its political regime posits much more utopian horizons than *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. For one thing Gilead is not worldwide and everlasting as Oceania seems to be in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. There is a mention of Canada and Great Britain, to both of which refugees try to flee (and some supposedly succeed) with the help of the two intertwining underground organizations Mayday and Underground Femaleroad. The rest of the world seems intact from the horrible totalitarian regime of Gilead, which gives the novel a utopian horizon.

Another element taking the novel further from the anti-utopian stance is the instability of Gilead's society, which is much greater than in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or any other totalitarian government in 20<sup>th</sup> century dystopian literature. The people of Gilead, even the supposedly powerful and wealthy citizens such as Commanders are nowhere near satisfied: they live with a Wife with whom they do not share intimacy; and with a Handmaid with whom they are made to perform sexual intercourse but are forbidden to share any other kind of relationship. As a result of this oppression of even such a high class of men, the Commander of Offred establishes an illegal relationship with her, which comes from dissatisfaction, loneliness, despair from the lack of an authentic relationship and is marked by insecurity and patronizing.

The dissatisfaction of the Commanders is furthermore accentuated through the Jezebel's Club. It is an illegal bar and a brothel where Commanders come to spend nights with prostitutes. The Jezebel's Club is an eloquent example of the pathological state of Gilead's society: the fundamentalist Christian dogma which is in the centre of Gilead's politics seems no more to be truly believed by anyone (except perhaps by Aunts, especially

Aunt Lydia) and the despair from the inhumanity of the society makes the ones who run it, the Commanders, inventing (or preserving) the very opposite of what the essence of society is supposed to be. Therefore, 'the Commanders' private abuse of Handmaids and their indulgence in Jezebel's Club are symptomatic of the political corruption and ultimate instability of Gilead itself. The discontent of the women and men turns Gilead into a weak dystopia compared to Huxley and Orwell.<sup>33</sup>

Although the setting of *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays a rather weak political dystopia, the actual plot (counter-narrative) brings no breakaway or a challenge to the Christian state and remains constricted within the boundaries of its political and ideological restrictions. From the very beginning throughout Offred is an imprisoned, suffering woman with no real hope to see the end of her suffering, to run away or join a militant rebellion, or simply to see again her husband and daughter. The novel ends ambiguously, when Offred is taken from her house by the Eyes who are said to be undercover members of the Mayday underground organization determined to overthrow Gilead. Offred does not know their true nature and thus she does not know whether she is going to her rescue or to her doom.

It can thus be said that while the setting of *The Handmaid's Tale* is dystopian, the plot is rather anti-utopian. The elements of the overall depressive mood of the plot is similar to the brooding hopelessness of Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and both him and Offred share the small amount of weak, separated pieces of hope which at the end seem to have served to no avail. Winston had his hope in his relationship with Julia, which is defeated at the end and Offred sought support in Ofglen, who eventually hangs herself and in Moira, who becomes a powerless, resigned woman. The very existence of the Mayday organization is also unclear and is thus reminiscent of the shadowy nature of the Brotherhood.

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<sup>33</sup> Moylan; 164

The Historical Notes at the very end of the book are even more ambiguous and can be read in a variety of ways. They consist of a lecture by professor Pieixoto at a symposium of scholars in the year 2195 whose topic is Offred's story found on a tape onto which she recorded it. The speaker, Professor Pieixoto, details the historical significance of Offred's story and relates it to its historical context. He essentially uses Offred's testimony to analyze the society of Gilead itself. It is clear from his lecture that the symposium takes place at a time when Gilead exists no more. It has fallen and now it is objectively analyzed by a group of scholars who seem to carry none of its dogmatic and violent outlooks and convictions. It is just on the contrary, they seem more intelligent and enlightened: while Gilead accepted only Christians as valuable citizens (imprisoning and executing others), the names of the scholars in 2195 such as Maryann Crescent Moon or Gopal Chatterjee indicate wide cultural diversity. This is a sign that Gilead did not succeed in reshaping the society wholly into the homogenic fundamental Christian one. The fact that these scholars live in a more utopian and enlightened society is apparent also in their 'certainty that compulsory state control over people's bodies is wrong, the past-tense reference to a long-gone era of superpowers and arms deals, the negative reference to "sociobiological theory of natural polygamy" as "scientific justification for some of the odder practices of the regime"<sup>34</sup> etc.

Obviously, this reading adds to the feeling of a utopian ending to the novel. None of the ferocities of Gilead survived and the society that replaced it seems much more utopian; moreover, the struggles of Offred were eventually not in vain since her faithful recordings serve as a very helpful account of the social situation and terrors of Gilead. In this way her suffering was at least partly given meaning to.

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<sup>34</sup> Moylan; 165

In another reading though, a flaw in the morality of the scholars can be found. The lecture by Professor Pieixoto is delivered in a casual and jovial tone, ignorant to the dire topic of his lecture. Pieixoto's treatment of Offred's life is cold, distant, impersonal and completely devoid of empathy or any recognition of her as a sentient and suffering human being. Moreover, he shows signs of ignorance and hypocrisy, for instance when, in between talking about her sufferings, he makes a casual joke about the quality of her education. ('She appears to have been an educated woman, insofar as graduate of any North American college of the time may be said to have been educated. (Laughter, some groans)<sup>35</sup>) Ironically, Offred is patronized and treated only as a means for something (mostly for reproducing purposes) throughout the course of the novel and even two hundred years later she remains to be patronized by Professor Pieixoto, who treats her also as a mere means; in this case a means of obtaining historical information for academic purposes. The message that this reading brings to the reader is that a dystopia does not necessarily have to have its basis in the usurpation of political power; it may as well be the case that people will always have mean-spirited nature regardless of the circumstances and thus utopia will be always unreachable for them with dystopia constantly lurking around the corner.

It will be thus fair to say that *The Handmaid's Tale* does not entail a criticism of some sort of totalitarian society only; it is an exploration of how a woman is maltreated by an establishment due to its harsh laws on the one hand and by an individual outside of this establishment due to his own corrupted nature on the other. It is perhaps an allusion to the complicated situation of the 1980s: even after the situation of women has improved since the 1960s (like after the fall of Gilead it supposedly has), there will always be a certain element of meanness in men which will mean an obstacle for women in their effort to grant their right for

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<sup>35</sup> Margaret Atwood *The Handmaid's Tale* (Canada:McClelland and Stewart edition, 1985) 287

equality. The reader does not finish reading *The Handmaid's Tale* with a feeling that Offred was treated by Professor Pieixoto as an equal human being to him, nor that he brought her any justice for her suffering. In other words, the depiction of the superficial and condescending manner in which Pieixoto talked about Offred may have been meant to show how foully in fact women were still treated by educated and 'enlightened' men in the beginning of the 1980s.

## Comparison between *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *This Perfect Day*

### I. Language and propaganda

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the reducing of general language and misusing it in favor of the political propaganda instead lies in the very core of the philosophy of the Party. Language

is a tool for rebellion, the Party knows, and thus it has to be revisioned and reduced so that none of the unwanted concepts can even occur to minds of future generations. Language and propaganda are closely connected because the citizens know only what the ruling class decides to tell them. In the case of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the Party completely rewrites cultural and historical facts and feeds them to the public. Moreover, since the method of the Party is to attack the very reason itself, it often changes a claimed historical fact in front of the eyes of the public who are unable to do anything about it.

Often in dystopian novels there is some sort of ceremony or ritual which is a part of propaganda and a means of ensuring conformity of the people. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* there is a ceremony called the 'Two Minutes of Hate'- a daily gathering in which the Party provokes hatred and tries to redirect it to a common enemy Emmanuel Goldstein. In *The Handmaid's Tale* there is a ceremony of a similar concept called 'Participation' which happens at the end of the 'Salvaging'. The most vulnerable category of women – the Handmaids, are rounded in a circle and a sentenced individual, in the only instance described by Offred a Guardian supposedly guilty of rape, is given to their mercy. The Handmaids are full of shared rage and they tear the Guardian into pieces. The intent behind both Participation and Two Minutes of Hate is similar: to redirect the shared, thus multiplied rage and hatred from the government to a 'bait'. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* it is an idea of an ultimate enemy (probably illusory anyway) and in *The Handmaid's Tale* it is a different individual at a time who might or might not have committed the crimes he was accused for.

*This Perfect Day* does not have a ceremony of this kind because it does not need one-regular treatments are enough to absorb potentiality of any kind of anti-government tendency. Nonetheless, there is a mythology built up around the four founders of The Family – Christ, Marx, Wood and Wei. A child's rhyme about them is being recited on playgrounds and

figures of speech based on them ('Christ and Wei!' instead of 'Oh my god!') are used on daily basis among the members. Besides the four founders, UniComp is also constantly put into the members' minds by the use of language: every time after a member is being thanked, he automatically says: Thank Uni. The importance of a constant presence of the founders and the ruler of The Family in everyday language lies in the strengthening (or reassuring) the feeling of security, belonging and fellowship of the members. It can be said that while propaganda in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid's Tale* has to focus on the repressed hatred of their crowds, the propaganda in *This Perfect Day* lies only in regular reminding to the members of how lucky they are to be the part of The Family.

The tradition of disinformation for the sake of propaganda continues in both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *This Perfect Day*. In Margaret Atwood's novel, we see that 'although the state is at war, only its victories are reported (and) ... history and the Book of Genesis are rewritten'<sup>36</sup> The more restrictive the totalitarian society is, the greater power lies in its propaganda because anything the ruling government says remains unchallenged. Offred is a good example of this inability to find truth because all that she knows about the political situation of Gilead comes from the few minutes the TV is turned on, which is most probably corrupted by the political propaganda anyway.

In *This Perfect Day* there is no need for a complicated and careful propaganda because the members believe anything they are told by their advisers. An alteration has been made though, namely the erasure of 'free' islands from all maps of The Family in order to hide the fact that there are still incurables living outside of The Family.

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<sup>36</sup> Rafaella Baccolini "Breaking the Boundaries: Gender, Genre, and Dystopia" *Per una definizione dell'utopia: Metodologie e discipline a confronto* 1992: 143

## II. Memory and history

Memory of the pre-dystopian period is in the dystopian literature usually a tool for the protagonists of the counter-narrative to keep mental distance from the dark times of the present or, in some cases, to even spark a rebellious fire. On the one hand, memory can be a haven to fall back to and on the other it can induce a thought: If the world once was a better place, perhaps it can be so again. In this way memory poses temporal boundaries to the dystopian society whereby it diminishes its power. A society such as Oceania would have its population believe that it is eternal and all powerful. Any building that looks well-preserved is said to have been built by the Party (however old it really is) and every invention is ascribed to the Party, too. There is a radical censorship imposed by the Party and any writing records of one's life are forbidden. A direct memory of a pre-dystopian time would thus contradict its all-powerful nature and therefore is the enemy. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Winston Smith sees the only hope in proles (the uneducated, working class), who, many of them old enough, still remember the times before The Party took over. Unfortunately there is no help coming from the proles since Orwell described them as too apathetic and ignorant.

The alteration of past is to some extent present also in the later two novels. In *The Handmaid's Tale* the Gilead's government declares every divorce and a subsequent remarriage invalid, thus extensively interfering into the functioning of the past and taking away identities of many people (especially women).

Offred's memory of the pre-Gileadean period is an important element which helps her remain sane and preserves her through the day. She falls back to the reveries about her past quite frequently, contemplating her child, her mother and husband, hoping she would see

them again. She also finds reassurance in the self-confidence of Moira (as she used to know her). This identification with her past self is inevitably non-identification with the role Gilead attributes to her. This kind of an attachment to the past is almost a political act; it is a will not to become indoctrinated by the philosophy of the new regime. It can be said that Offred thus has at least the one consolation which Winston does not. His first memories are of his mother's unhappiness and her following disappearance, none of which brings any consolation, but only adds more gloom.

It is true, though, that the political significance of memory is more prevalent in Orwell than in Atwood. Winston, if only he had found a reaction, would have tried to convince the proles to rebel on the basis of their common memory of a better past. For Atwood, on the other hand, memory means more of an emotional detachment from the present situation. In Orwell memory means an outer resistance, in Atwood it means an inner resistance.

*This Perfect Day* is in this respect a utopian realization of what in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ends in an anti-utopian apathy. The whole 'Coming alive' and 'Fighting back'<sup>37</sup> stem from Chip's memory of his grandfather Papa Jan who sparked in him the initial feeling of discontent. Papa Jan is an enthusiastic, concerned and thoughtful member who himself has memory of the past where the situation was not that bad (this may be the reason of his nonconformity). He, being physically unable to start a revolution himself but able to influence others, is a successful (utopian) version of the apathetic, thoughtless and weak proles, who, although in majority, only behave as sheep in herds controlled by the invincible Party.

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<sup>37</sup> These are the two of four names of parts *This Perfect Day* is divided into

### III. Sex

The totalitarian government of each society has a distinctively different attitude towards sex and sexual freedom. Although all three governments recognize sex to be a powerful tool, they all approach it from a very different perspective. The Party's idea of an absolute power includes elimination of any trace of privacy of their people. Their philosophy is that any action which is not done for the sake of the Party goes against the Party and diminishes its power. This is the case especially with sex because it creates a strong emotional attachment to another person which is otherwise supposed to be centered on the Party. This is the reason why the counter-narrative is all built up around a sexual relationship. Winston and Julia know that their relationship is a political act because by being together and loving each other they enforce their own individuality and declare at least a partial independence of their lives from the Party. There is of course no independence accepted by the Party whatsoever.

The final solution of the Party is to destroy humanity completely by either killing every emotion or redirecting it for use of the Party. Since the sex instinct can hardly be redirected, it has to be defeated. O'Brien explains to Winston: 'The sex instinct will be eradicated. Procreation will be an annual formality like the renewal of a ration card. We shall abolish the orgasm. There will be no loyalty, except loyalty toward the Party. There will be no love, except the love of Big Brother.'<sup>38</sup>

The process of destruction of the sex instinct is underway already. From the early childhood the Party underpins children's contempt of sex by organizations such as Junior Anti-sex League and others. The Party makes sure that sexual intercourse between a married

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<sup>38</sup> Orwell; 242

couple is done merely out of sense of duty (like between Winston and his ex-wife) and any encounter with a prostitute is punished by imprisonment or deportation. The notion of family is, as has been said, encouraged only within the purpose of control and any kind of a sincere relationship is destroyed, which is the reason why Winston and Julia have to hide.

In another classical dystopia, *We* by Zamyatin, sexual drive plays perhaps an even more crucial role in the development of the counter-narrative. While both novels show how effective and dangerous brainwashing can be, the initial stances of the main protagonists are different: Winston has always been a non-conformist individual who is somehow resistant to the Party's propaganda but D-503 in *We* is at the beginning a regular conformed and brainwashed member of the One State. Winston then uses the sexual relationship as a sort of escape from the cruel reality by creating his and Julia's own illusory reality in the room above the shop; in *We*, on the other hand, D-503's sexual attraction towards I-330, who is a non-conformist and a rebel, causes the very creation of the counter-narrative, because his growing love draws him off the ignorance and content in the oppressive state, making him a non-conformist member himself. In the end D-503, after having been exposed to the "Great Operation" (similar to lobotomy), betrays I-330 and her rebellious organization similarly as Winston betrays Julia. The confession and betrayal means the conversion of Winston and return of D-503 to a machine-like state with an unnatural adoration of the system. Yet the personal affection of D-503 is a symbol of hope because despite the eventual failure D-503 did undergo a change of personality, an awakening which brought him awareness and individuality at least for some time. Zamyatin's legacy in *We* is the invocation of individuality through wanting and longing for things according to one's own will, because it is the illegal pursuit of I-330 (otherwise even girlfriends were assigned by the One State), which brings about D-503's change to a real individual. As it is known, it is always difficult to look for

traces of hope in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, since even the strong relationship between Winston and Julia carries no useful message because it is at no point even close to a real success against the Party.

The one important resemblance *This Perfect Day* bears with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in this respect is the fact that the sexual drive of the members is slowed down, together with many other emotions. The sexual act cannot become a politically significant act and is in fact an ordinary routine because its weekly performance is generally demanded by the standards of the society and any irregularities are reported to the adviser. The Family is different from IngSoc in that it not only allows but even encourages the members to have true (though dulled) feelings for others, particularly unbroken altruism towards everyone around. The Family thus creates harmony, which is, despite its inhuman origin, still utopian in itself, unlike the society of Oceania in which there is no harmony and not a single trace of even an apparent utopia.

The approach of Levin's society towards sex can be traced back to *Brave New World* in which sex was an admitted outlet (together with soma and feelies) for the people to somehow utilize their energy. It comes back to the idea of redirection again. The governing forces in *Brave New World* let promiscuity be the standard among the people in order to keep their positivity stimulated and energy always contained. A similar idea is retained in *This Perfect Day* although instead of constant promiscuity (with no family to build up to in the case of *Brave New World*) the standard is rather to always have a partner with whom, provided reproduction is allowed, one can marry and start a family.

Both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *This Perfect Day* show that rebellion only through sex is not enough. Julia is a clever and perceptive member of the Outer Party who sincerely despises the whole philosophy of IngSoc and is a secret, passionate rebel. But her rebellion

seems to stop as soon as she becomes involved in the intimate relationship with Winston. She is not interested in the politics or warfare of Oceania and she does not care about Goldstein's book which is said to be greatly important to the Brotherhood. Julia intuitively knows about Doublethink and the Party's constant lying but 'she only questioned the teachings of the Party when they in some way touched upon her own life.'<sup>39</sup> It seems that, probably coming from her utter disbelief in a possibility of a complete victory over the Party (she does not even believe in the existence of The Brotherhood), her ultimate goal is simply to maintain the few hours of freedom spent in the room above the shop with Winston and some additional goods such as authentic coffee or tea.

Julia's attitude is echoed in Chip's first girlfriend among the incurables, Snowflake. She is from a small group of other incurables who help Chip awaken for the first time. They secretly meet once or twice a week and enjoy free conversations and tobacco. The group consists mostly of couples because once uncured, their sexual drive increased rapidly. When Chip enters this fellowship, instantly bonding with Snowflake, he is at first satisfied by the freedom he has not yet known. Later though he, like Winston, feels that this is not enough and that rebellion of a greater scope should be invoked. The answer he is given by King, the leader of the group, captures well the attitudes of both Julia and Snowflake: 'There's nothing we can do about *anything*. This is it right here, brother; all the freedom we can hope for — a pipe and a few jokes and some extra sex. Let's not lose what we've got, all right?'<sup>40</sup>

Levin was probably inspired by Orwell in his belief that to win a certain amount of personal freedom is never definite until the society itself changes. Both Winston's and Julia's meetings in the room above the shop and the King's group's in the pre-U Museum had to

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<sup>39</sup> Orwell, 139

<sup>40</sup> Levin, 117

come to a cruel end with the few pieces of extra goods and an 'additional sex' making no difference at the very end.

The exploitation of Handmaids in the Republic of Gilead is based purely upon sexual reasons, yet sex and a romantic attachment are the only things that 'enable (the) heroine to progress from 'helpless victim' to 'sly subversive survivor.''<sup>41</sup>

Although Gilead's choice to maintain Handmaids for mere reproductive purposes is mainly pragmatic for improving the birthrate, its patriarchal categorization of women based on fertility is a powerful tool to keep them isolated and subdued. Among other reasons, this categorization creates animosity between the 'classes' of women themselves, especially the Wives and the Handmaids. The Wives envy the Handmaids their fertility and the Handmaids envy the Wives their relative freedom and power.

The power of sexual control Gilead holds over women is visible in the correlative status of the Wives and the Handmaids. The Wives such as Serena Joy once held respectable positions in the society which are now transformed into an aristocratic standing next to one of the elite Commanders. This superior standing of Wives is visible in their patronizing control over Marthas and Handmaids. Ironically, the Wives are older, infertile and lonely women who once helped build Gilead but are completely dissatisfied with the outcome, which has left them bitter and unhappy. In reality they bear no political power at all. This superior position is still granted for them precisely because their weariness and exhausted character can bring no thread to the society and it is actually their unhappiness, cruelty and envy which Gilead uses to further control the Handmaids, whereby a reflexive system of self-control is created.

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**41**

Madonne Miner, "'Trust Me': Reading the Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*"  
*Twentieth Century Literature* Summer 1991: 150

Contrary to the Handmaids, there is no need for sexual control in the Wives because their sexuality has already dried out.

Handmaids, on the other hand, are the young, fertile, energetic and passionate women. They are active, unlike the Wives; they try to escape, like Moira, join the rebellious Mayday organization like Ofglen or establish forbidden sexual relationships like Offred. Gilead deliberately puts them in the lowest position from all other women, to the houses with the Wives set against them, and with barely any personal freedom.

This kind of enforcement is underlined by sexual control where the only encounter they have is a forced, monthly, unpleasant and unromantic copulation with the Commander, which is the kind of act O'Brien may have in mind when he talks about procreation as an 'annual formality'.

Barbara Ehrenreich, an author and a political activist remarks that 'in *The Handmaid's Tale*, as in 1984 the only truly subversive force appears to be love.'<sup>42</sup> I would add, love and another manifestation of a personal affection, sex. The main protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred, finds relief and almost a certain shade of happiness in a sexual relationship. The relationship Offred establishes with Nick is not romantic like Winston's with Julia; it is based purely on sexual desire which contrasts with Offred's monthly disinterested encounter with the Commander in that with Nick, a true sexual act, a true 'wanting' happens. We see that Offred remains internally distant from the role Gilead has assigned to her first by her memories of her husband Luke, then by an atypical relationship with the Commander filled with both power-play and special allowances; and lastly by the intimate relationship with Nick, which is also the reason for her (probable) eventual escape.

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<sup>42</sup> Miner, 150

Offred preserves sanity and an inner freedom similarly to Winston, by preserving something independent from the society, in both cases it is an affair- a forbidden sexual relationship.

Towards the end Offred is so much absorbed by her secret meetings with Nick that she no more cares about the Mayday rebellion or the political situation of Gilead. In this respect she reminds one of Julia who also does not care about politics; the difference between them is that Offred's disinterest in politics and sudden focus merely on her own 'well being' comes more from a continuing desperation and is a result of a long-lasting sexual torment to which Julia at least was not subjected.

The result of Julia's involvement in a forbidden sexual relationship gives her only a momentary relief but does not lead to any lasting freedom. It is even the reason for her and Winston's ultimate downfall – they betray each other, which means that they have lost the last piece of sovereignty and control over themselves. In this respect *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a more utopian alternative. The will to stay sane and human by participating in forbidden activities such as a sexual relationship at the end proves to have been to some avail- on the basis of his relationship with Offred Nick decides to help her escape. 'Love is the excess term which the system can neither accommodate nor suppress.'<sup>43</sup> This is precisely the case with Gilead but not with the Party's Oceania, in which love and sex are suppressed successfully and completely.

#### IV. Escape

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<sup>43</sup> Miner; 150

In every dystopian novel there is an idea of 'the other' place which works as a utopian horizon for the counter-narrative, a place ideologically opposite to the dystopian elements of the ruling system or the only haven the protagonists can find refuge in. It can be real or illusory, reachable or unreachable and it can serve both utopian and dystopian purposes of a novel. The extent to which this place balances the society of the general narrative also partly determines the dystopian/anti-utopian nature of a text.

Aldous Huxley took Zamyatin's idea of the other place as a centre of natural savagery which contrasts with the unnaturally uniform and technologically based modern society. Zamyatin's strong, utopian reminder of the free savage lands as spatial boundaries to the One State were by Huxley transformed to a weaker one, since the savage lands are in the society of the World State only reservations. In both cases, though, the free places are real and reachable (legally or illegally). *We* is the more utopian of the two because it ends on the verge of revolution (since there is no last revolution) and the power of the One State is much weakened by the growing strength of the savages. In *Brave New World* John the Savage finds himself depressed from the value system of the World State society; moreover, after having failed to convince the rationally thinking World Controller about the values of his own, John departs to isolation and eventually succumbs to his own depression. The dehumanizing modernity of the World State prevails.

In the anti-utopian *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the countryside and the room above the shop are the 'other' places, but their potential is devoid of multitude and militantism of the savagery beyond the One State and of the strength of tradition of the World State's reservations. Most importantly, unlike in *We* or *Brave New World*, the havens of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are only illusory because they exist merely within the spatial and ideological

framework of Oceania, with the room above the shop being a deliberate trap for the thought criminals.

In *This Perfect Day* the reader witnesses a journey whose length and scope is greater than any of the classical dystopias. At several points Chip manages to deceive and mislead the omnipresent and omniscient UniComp and even though The Family is worldwide, Chip has managed to travel from continent to continent, unnoticed. In contrast, Oceania does not even pretend to be worldwide; there are two other super powers, Eurasia and Eastasia. Yet Winston seems desperately immobile and feels sure to be caught at some point which strongly contrasts with Chip's enthusiasm and determination. Winston's longest journey is to the countryside and even there he is afraid of being recorded by hidden microphones. As has been said, Winston's escape is only to an illusory freedom inside Oceania, while Chip's is to a really free place outside of The Family. It is interesting that in this respect *This Perfect Day* is a combination of dystopian literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which sets its plots in future and reciprocally of old utopias such as *Gulliver's Travels* in which utopia is found in an isolated island outside of the modern society. The Western society which Swift is criticizing through the island of Houyhnhnms and other islands is in Levin's novel the last barrier before an even worse world. Both Swift and Levin criticize our world but while Swift does it by means of an invented utopia which cannot be historically connected with our own society, Levin uses dystopia for criticism instead, and makes a further statement (although metaphorical), representing thus the dystopian tradition of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: our world and the other one can indeed be historically connected because the present society has the negative potential to become the dystopian one.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* Gilead is the single dystopian society surrounded by the non-oppressive places (Canada, Great Britain) similarly as One State of *We* is surrounded by the

savagery. It is not impossible to escape; Offred's friend Moira has almost done it. Moreover, the story takes place in the former state of Maine from which Canada is potentially reachable. With even secret organizations working on rescue operations, the notion of escape is permanently on minds of the Handmaids. Yet, the story of the counter-narrative proves Gilead and its oppressive forces to prevail over individual efforts of the Handmaids. Moira fails to escape; Ofglen is uncovered by the Eyes and Offred is a subject of bully by Aunt Lydia, and Serena Joy throughout the novel. Her story is not building up to a grandiose finale like Chip's; she is too powerless to make any escape plans and her vulnerable state is accentuated by her total loss of interest when she surrenders her last will of resistance and completely gives in to the power of Nick, who can now choose to denounce her or help her. The eventual escape happens without any deliberate Offred's input and it seems purely Nick's initiative.

If the Handmaids are supposed to be symbols for the fear of gender oppression indicated by the early 1980s, Atwood's suggestion through Nick and partly the Commander may be that the fight for equal rights should not rest only on women's shoulders. Firstly, although Offred's Commander is one of the elite group of people of Gilead, enjoying many privileges, yet he, by illegally spending nights with Offred, playing Scrabble and such, shows that he wishes to treat her as an equal human being, which is quite different from the role Gilead assigns to the Handmaids like Offred. It is true that his frustration of the system makes him sometimes patronize her, but he still shows signs of humanity and empathy when he tries to go beyond the automatic nature of their official relationship and at least partly try to ease her suffering.

The more important man in this perspective is Nick, the Guardian assigned to Offred's Commander. He is said to be the member of the Eyes, and can denounce her anytime during their illegal relationship. Yet it is through 'Nick's intervention that Offred seemingly ''comes

to life, escapes from Gilead, tapes her account, and thereby provide us with the story of her past. <sup>44</sup> Their relationship is a strange one, it is based on limitations, desperation and initial distrust. At the same time it seems to set Offred inwardly free and in a certain sense at peace; she no more cares about her escape: 'The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here with Nick.'<sup>45</sup> Nick not only helps her bear the current life in Gilead but also probably helps her escape. The probability of this conclusion lies in the fact that there is a text at all; Offred supposedly taped it only after her escape from Gilead.

The above mentioned set of observations show that if *The Handmaid's Tale* is supposed to be a symbol for the worsening situation of women in the Western society, Atwood nevertheless bears some hope in men and in their positive ability to interact. This belief is, in my opinion, in *The Handmaid's Tale* portrayed in the Commander, who tries to treat Offred better than he has to and than he is allowed to, and further solidified in Nick who provides emotional shelter to Offred and even risks his life to save hers from the deadly forces of Gilead.

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<sup>44</sup> Miner; 161

<sup>45</sup> Atwood; 255

## Conclusion

The effort of this thesis was to understand the development of the literary genre of dystopia and then the three novels *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *This Perfect Day* and *The Handmaid's Tale* as the results of and further influences to this development. I aimed to treat the latter two novels as the continuation of the Orwellian dystopian tradition on one hand, and as independently meaningful pieces of writing on the other.

In my analysis of all three novels I maintained the differentiation between dystopia and anti-utopia as one of the most important categorizing factors because an inclination to either reveals a lot about their attitude in terms of overcoming the authoritative political system, which is in most cases the baseline idea in writing a dystopian text.

I hope I have accomplished to show that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is rightly an extremely valuable and trend-making anti-utopian text some of whose ideas continue through *The Handmaid's Tale* and *This Perfect Day* unchanged, some deliberately transformed. The most frequent criticism of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* I encountered while reading reviews and academic articles, namely its closed anti-utopian pessimism which lacks 'a utopian horizon than might provoke political awareness or effort,'<sup>46</sup> is not applicable to the two later novels. Although the hopelessness of Offred against the oppressive regime is similar to Winston's against the Party, the general narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a much weaker establishment than that

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<sup>46</sup> Moylan; 163

of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Gilead is tumbling down from within since almost none of its members, the oppressors or the oppressed, are satisfied with the system. This is an indication that the way Gilead is stratified is unnatural and mostly undesired. Atwood's message goes beyond the textual level in suggesting that the traditional patriarchal beliefs of political groups opposing the feminist movements will never lead to satisfaction of the society itself. Atwood at the same time remains realistic and does not let Offred indulge in hope. The considerable amount of ordeal caused by the heartless totalitarian regime which Offred undergoes everyday is a reminder of hopelessness of a single individual in fight with the regime, which is present in Orwell (who probably took it from Huxley), continues to Atwood and is challenged in Levin.

The manner in which the counter-narrative defeats the narrative is a strong asset in both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and can serve, in my opinion, as an answer to the criticism of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The dark, shabby, deteriorated streets of London filled with poverty and paranoia and the exaggerated cruelty and cynicism of the Party are the deliberately vivid and striking elements, whose suggestiveness shakes the readers' mind enough to function as a warning or prevention itself.

Similarly it is, I argue, with the sinister atmosphere of equally cruel Gilead slowly closing in on Offred and with her helpless contemplations about the past life she has lost. Offred's presentation of herself as a feeling and suffering woman contrasts strongly with Gilead's perception of her as a mere means, imposing on her all kinds of evils, and is an effective tool to raise awareness and start discussions which the doubtful times of the 1980s very much needed.

I chose to analyze *This Perfect Day* as an example of a post-Orwellian dystopian text because although maintaining the basic framework of classical dystopias- clash of an authoritarian society and a resisting individual- it is in many ways innovative.

It combines a technocratic society of *Brave New World* which is artificially based on mood-modifiers, forced happiness and content and Orwellian criticism of human's will for an absolute power, as present in the programmers of The UniComp, especially their leader Wei. His last words: 'there's joy in having it, in controlling, in being the only one,'<sup>47</sup> convey a similar idea as O'Brien's power for power's sake. *This Perfect Day* follows *Brave New World's* tradition of a non-violent pain free society but after the initial exposition moves the emphasis to the oppressive authority of the state in which nonconformity is not only unusual and undesired as in *Brave New World*, but it is directly pursued and eradicated like in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Innovation of *This Perfect Day* lies in its portrayal of Mallorca as a real life society and putting it in contrast with the fictional world of The Family. While anti-utopian texts such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* use the dystopia to reject utopia; (formally) dystopian texts like *The Handmaid's Tale* use the fictional dystopia to criticize the real world, *This Perfect Day* manages to criticize both fictional dystopia (trying to cover itself up as utopia) and the real life society from each other's perspective, and both on a textual level.

After the reader gets used to the functioning of The Family, he or she understands Chip's shock when he comes to Mallorca. By putting the two worlds into perspective Levin avoids their black and white perception by the reader. The philosophy of The Family seems not altogether wrong after all since absence of some of its features, such as crime and greed

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<sup>47</sup> Levin, 309

and the feeling of community and companionship make Mallorca seem even more miserable. Nevertheless, even though Mallorca is not exactly a utopian place, Chip is reassured in his hatred of The Family and his decision to destroy it; the belief that people should always have the right to freedom and hence individuality is the decisive factor in Chip's thinking and as a driving motive of a counter-narrative it permeates the dystopian literary tradition from Zamyatin, Forster and Huxley to Orwell, Levin, Atwood and others.

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