Depictions of Dystopia in Brave New World, 1984 and The Handmaid’s Tale

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Introduction

Throughout the centuries people have been dreaming about the ideal societies in which all citizens are happy and prosperous. The biblical paradise or mythical Arcadia are well-known idyllic places which created the images of perfect civilizations in the past. Literature has been reflecting the desires of humanity for centuries and since Thomas Moore’s book titled *Utopia* written in 1516 the notion of “utopia” meaning “no place” has been common knowledge. At the same time people started imagining the worst possible societies, which led to the creation of a counter genre to utopia, namely dystopia.

In order to understand the differences in the depiction of dystopian societies, it is vital to be familiar with the features common to the majority of this literary genre. *The Free Encyclopedia* defines dystopia (or anti-utopia) as “a fictional society that is the antithesis of utopia. It is usually characterized by an oppressive social control, such as an authoritarian or totalitarian government “ (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dystopia). Other elements that appear in most dystopias include a hierarchical society, protagonists who question the social order, lack of freedom, the motifs of fear, propaganda and constant surveillance of the citizens and a background story of war, revolution or some disaster. In fact, dystopias usually portray some modern trends and elements of contemporary politics which constitute a warning to the future generations.

The aim of this essay is to present characteristic features of anti-utopias, depict the differences between dystopian societies and portray the destructive influence of the totalitarian systems on the characters in *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell and *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood.
1. Examples of Typical Elements of Anti-utopia.

1.1 *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley

One of the examples of imaginary societies ruled by a totalitarian government is a novel written by Aldous Huxley in 1932, *Brave New World*. As June Derry rightly states, the author depicts “the ideological and governmental control of scientific research” (83). As in most examples of this literary genre, the reader is introduced to a background story of a momentous event in the history that started the new social order. In this case it is The Nine Year War and the great Economic Collapse that introduces the technological revolution.

The text is set in the World State and presents the industrialized society based on rigid control of reproduction. The typical dystopian convention of “a pyramidal political structure controlled by an exclusive elite” (Rao 17) is clearly visible in the novel. The society is divided into social classes, from the most intelligent Alphas and Betas to sub-human Gammas, Deltas and Epsilons who are poisoned with alcohol during production so that they can work but not think independently. People are no longer born, “the principle of mass production at last applied to biology” (Huxley 19). Therefore different types of people are created and conditioned to take certain places in society. Moreover, citizens of the World State regularly take a drug called soma in order to experience hallucinations which hide real feelings. That is why most of them do not question the conditions in which they live.

Hypnopedic conditioning and stupefying drugs gives the citizens the impressions of false happiness so they do not think about personal freedom. As a result, the powerful state has absolute control over its citizens because it prevents them from individual thinking. Not only are the citizens controlled in their childhood but also during their adult lives. One of the ten Controllers who rules the World State says that “all the people (...) who have got
independent ideas of their own” are sent to an island (Huxley 200). This quotation supports the statement that in the futuristic world of Huxley some patterns of behaviour have to be respected under the threat of being expelled from the country.

Another feature of a negative utopia is the “obliteration of love” (Rao 18). In *Brave New World* happiness is associated with sex and that is why promiscuity is one of the social norms. However, at the same time there is no place for feelings such as love or friendship. It is also impossible to imagine dystopia without social outcasts who do not go along with the social order. An example of a protagonist who stands out from the masses is Bernard Marks, who not only looks like an outsider but also behaves like one as he does not have many sexual encounters and does not appreciate soma.

Finally, a typical generic convention is also reflected in the fact that inhabitants of the World State are also manipulated by means of propaganda. People are constantly bombarded with slogans, such as: “every one belongs to every one else” (Huxley 48), “never put off till tomorrow the fun you can have today” (Huxley 91) or “civilization is sterilization” (Huxley 113).
Another classic example of the literary genre of dystopia is *Nineteen Eighty-Four* written by George Orwell in 1949. Like most examples of a negative utopia it portrays a totalitarian society in which people live in “a kind of hysteria” (Orwell 21). Isaac Deutscher describes Ninety Eighty Four as “a kind of ideological weapon in the cold war” (Thody 172). The plot of the book is set in Oceania and tells the story of Winston Smith, a man working in the Ministry of Truth who is fed up with the politics of the ruling Party and seeks any opportunity to rebel against its constant monitoring. The main protagonist regularly commits crimes against the party’s law, from the thought crime and keeping a diary, to falling in love with Julia. Finally, he is caught by the Thought Police and by enduring physical pain and confronting his biggest fears he is forced to love the regime.

It is not difficult to notice that the novel has some characteristic elements of the aforementioned genre. As Eleonora Rao states: “dystopian future (…) will involve the total elimination of the idea of freedom” (17). From the beginning of the book, the reader finds out that the main protagonist, Winston Smith, is under surveillance. Telescreens and hidden microphones monitor every movement of the citizens of Oceania and there are “always the eyes watching you and the voice enveloping you. Asleep or awake, working or eating, indoors or out of doors, in the bath or in bed- no escape.” (Orwell 29). Moreover, the author of the novel invented a fictional figure, Big Brother, who is the leader of the nation and has omnipotent power. Despite the fact that no one has ever seen the figurehead, the huge posters with capitalized caption “Big Brother is watching you” remind the observer of his presence. The consequence of psychological manipulation is “doublethink,” people deprived of the ability of individual thinking accept two contradictory ideas in their minds. For example, the fact that in one speech, the speaker quotes Eurasia as Oceania’s enemy and ally is not
questioned. “But it means also the ability to believe that black is white, and more, to know that black is white, and to forget that one has ever believed on the contrary” (Orwell 221).

Furthermore, the Party suppresses sexual desire and expects citizens to express their emotions and frustrations by showing hatred towards the enemies of Oceania during the obligatory Two Minutes Hate sessions. Sexual encounters are tolerated for the sole purpose of procreation. Furthermore, brainwashing is a daily routine as the Party controls all the information and history of the country. Winston’s work in the Ministry of Truth is to write the history in an invented language of Oceania, Newspeak, so that it meets the needs of the Party’s politics. People are not allowed to keep any photographs or documents in order not to have their personal memories about the past. A total control of thoughts and behaviour is also possible thanks to propaganda and numerous slogans appearing on the telescreens such as: war is peace, freedom is slavery and ignorance is strength. Even the institution of family is undermined because children become members of an organization called Junior Spies and are encouraged to spy against their parents.

Moreover, society is divided into the Inner and Outer Party members and proles, which also suggests a classic pattern of anti-utopian literature. Robert Protherough rightly notices that in Nineteen Eighty Four “a single self-perpetuating elite has replaced all earlier forms of social and political hierarchy” (2). Like in most stories of this genre, the social order in Orwell’s novel is a result of a revolution and there are some protagonists who question the powerful state. Winston and Julia disobey the laws reinforced by the Party. They have an affair, rent a room in the proles district and meet secretly. What is more, both of them want to act against the Party and join an underground organization called Brotherhood because they believe that it will be a blow against the regime.

Lastly, another generic convention mentioned by Ruud Teeuwen in his article Dystopia’s Point of No Return is the atmosphere of terror (Wilson, 117). The feeling of fear is
omnipresent in the novel and expressed by the main protagonist constantly. Winston states that in Oceania “no emotion was pure, because everything was mixed up with fear and hatred” (Orwell 133).
1.3 *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Margaret Atwood

Written in 1986, Margaret Atwood’s novel is also an example of a negative utopia. Barbara Hill Rigney calls this book “an Orwellian dystopia dominated by the horrors of theocracy and puritanism” but instead of a figurehead of Big Brother there is ideology in general (114). It is set in the futuristic United States, the theocratic Republic of Gilead, at the beginning of the twenty first century when the Congress was overthrown and a patriarchal social system introduced. Women were deprived of their rights gradually, from credit cards subversion and prohibition from schools and work places to being restricted solely to reproductive functions. As the main protagonist Offred states it: “I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will (...). Now the flash arranges itself differently. I’m a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping” (Atwood 84).

Frequent elements in anti-utopian fiction that can be noticed in Atwood’s novel are the lack of freedom and the existence of a hierarchical system in the society. In this case the restriction of freedom concerns mostly women. Because of an environmental disaster birth rates decreased and therefore handmaids were assigned to bear children for elite couples who have problems with conceiving. Before becoming handmaids, women are indoctrinated to be subservient to men in Rachel and Leah Re-education Center. What is more, future handmaids are brainwashed with ideas such as:” There is more than one kind of freedom, said aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it” (Atwood 33). As in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty Four*, a state’s repression of citizens is reflected in the control of language. Official vocabulary is introduced and men are defined by their military rank whereas women are
defined by their gender roles as Wives, Handmaids and Marthas. Men believe themselves to
be omnipotent in the book, as Offred comments the Commanders behaviour when he takes
her to the brothel: “he’s reached that state of intoxication which power is said to inspire, the
state in which you believe you are indispensable and can therefore do anything, absolutely
anything you like, anything at all” (Atwoot 248).

Finally, according to Eleonora Rao dystopian fiction involves “an exclusive elite,
which maintains power by means of an efficient police system” (17). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*
the secret police force, refereed to as the Eyes, watches every move of the citizens. Another
typical element of a negative utopia is the existence of underground organisations and
opponents of the regime. Ofglen, the main protagonist’s shopping partner is a member of
Mayday, which aim to overthrowing Gilead. However, she kills herself when she finds out
that the secret police discovered her Mayday membership. The second rebellious character is
Moira, Offred’s school friend who makes a few escape attempts but ends up as a prostitute
serving the Commanders. Moira was ground down by the totalitarian system just like
Winston’s independent spirit was crushed by the oppressive regime in Oceania.
2. Differences in the Portrayal of Dystopian Societies

2.1 The Handmaid’s Tale- a patriarchal society

Although dystopian fiction is usually associated with the male writers, there is a considerable number of female authors writing about future societies. One of them is Margaret Atwood who “turns the traditional dystopia upside down, engaging in the debate about gender and genre.”(Howells 5) The difference in the depiction of the subject is connected with the fact that the story is presented from a woman’s point of view. As rightly stated by Cavalcanti: “Following "the reduction of women" convention observed in feminist dystopian writing, the novel depicts a futuristic space in which women's social roles have been thoroughly dominated and severely limited by a patriarchal order”(20). Offred, the narrator of the book presents the life in the totalitarian Republic of Gilead from her own perspective. The fact that the reality in the Republic is presented from the handmaid’s point of view gives the reader an insight into the life of the oppressed. This supports Coral Ann Howell’s statement about feminist utopias in which the officially silenced become the central narrative voice (5).

To begin with, Offred as a narrator tells the story about her own experience in the Republic of Gilead and her life before the introduction of the new regime. Her social class is low, she is one of the Handmaids, women who are forced to bear children for the upper class. She is deprived of all privacy. Even her name is derived from her Commander’s name, and combined with “of” at the beginning. Moreover, all the Handmaids are objectified, as their main role was to have sex with their Commanders and become pregnant. Offred’s description of “the ceremony” supports the idea that there is no place for any feelings: “My skirt is hitched to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking (…) I do not say making love because this is not what he is doing” (Atwood 121). Furthermore, women have
no access to books, newspapers, telephones or television and are allowed to go only for shopping trips but instead of money are supplied with the pictures of the products.

Women are deprived of everything apart from their past. Offred remembers her life before the Republic of Gilead and in the “Nights” chapters gives a record of her memories. She has a husband and a little daughter. Her life, like lives of all women, starts changing with the introduction of the new regime. Firstly, the access to bank accounts is forbidden. Then, she loses her job and is forced to play the role of a housewife and eventually is caught with Luke and their daughter trying to escape to Canada. As a consequence they are separated and she does never see them again. The way to stand the oppressive regime is by remembering about the life from the past. Like Winston Smith in Ninety Eighty-Four, who believes that memory is a means of fighting against the party, Offred keeps the knowledge of her real name “like something hidden, some treasure [she] will come back to dig up, one day” (Atwood 108).

Not only does Offred tell the story of her life, but she also presents an eye-witness account of life stories of different women in Gilead. Atwood presents a wide range of women who take different positions in the society. One of the characters is a college friend of Offred, Moira, who is a lesbian and a feminist. Moira’s feminist views are not tolerated under the new regime but she refuses to accept the new situation passively. She does not want to live her life as a handmaid and makes a successful attempt to escape from the Red Center. Eventually, she is caught and becomes a prostitute in a club for Commanders called “Jezabel.” She abandones her feminist ideas and chooses a life she would normally despise because she thinks it is less humiliating than being a handmaid.

Atwood also introduces the character of Offred’s mother who has been a member of America’s Women’s Liberation Movement. Supporters of this activist group advocate sexual freedom, abortion and oppose pornography as a sign of objectification of women. Offred
does not support her mother’s views and compares them to the doctrine of the ruling party, saying: “Mother. You wanted a women’s culture. Well, now there is one.” (Atwood 164) She finds out that her mother ends her life in the Colonies, treated as an Unwoman. As Hilde Stales rightly points out, Atwood “Envisages (...) replacing patriarchal ideology by matriarchal one” (Stales 36).

On the other hand, obedient Handmaids and Aunts represent Pro-Life campaigners and fundamentalist Christians who oppose ideas expressed by feminists. The best example is Aunt Lydia who when working at the Red Centre introduces women to the ideology of Gilead. She wants women to believe that their main duty is to stay at home and bear children, “Love is not the point,” she argues (Atwood 285). Offred can not get out of her head the slogans repeated by Aunt Lydia. They torment her like a recurring nightmare.

An example of an obedient citizen of Gilead is a Handmaid, Janine. She seems to believe in a new social order and tries to obey the new laws because before the introduction of the regime she felt unsafe. At the age of fourteen, she is gang-raped and has an abortion. However, she does not find happiness in her new life because she bears an ill child and becomes mad.

A Handmaid dealing with her life in new circumstances in a different way is Ofglen, Offred’s shopping partner. She is not as passive as the main character who does not want to become a member of an underground organization fighting against the authoritarian regime. She chooses to hang herself, rather than be kept prisoner and reveal the names of other members.

Another character worth mentioning is Serena Joy, the Commander’s wife who has to look at her husband having sex with Offred. Before the creation of the Republic she is a gospel singer, taking part in TV shows and advocating family values. That is why the narrator states that “She stays in her home, but it doesn’t seem to agree with her.” (Atwood 61)
Although she is an anti-feminist, a society in which women’s status depends on their reproductive abilities does not make her happy.

Atwood touches upon a lot of vital problems of the twenty and 21st century. She considers the consequences of infringing basic human rights. She raises the subject of racial oppression, religious intolerance and extreme fundamentalism. People who do not agree with the Republic’s ideology and religion, are hanged. Offred witnesses the hanging of Catholics, Baptists, Jews and doctors who perform abortion. There is no place for individuality and even people on the top of the hierarchy complain about the system. The Commander says: “We thought we could do better” (Atwood 273).

However, the main theme concerns the position of women in society. The social order based on the patriarchal system is destructive for both women and men. By introducing the feminist motifs, Atwood also considers misogynistic attitudes in the society and reaches a conclusion that such social order has also negative influence on the individuals. Both diametrically opposed views overlook the issue of love and dehumanise human beings:

2.2 Brave New World - a society dominated by technology

A considerable number of negative utopias present different types of totalitarian regimes all of which are usually based on fear. However, Aldous Huxley presents consumerist society as being dominated by technological achievements based on artificial pleasures and happiness. As rightly stated by Neil Postman “Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us” (Postman 124). The World’s State ideology focuses on stability and happiness. There is no poverty, sickness, crime and unemployment. The social system is reminiscent of communism as all the people are provided with work places. Despite the fact that all the basic needs of the citizens are satisfied, the futuristic society is far from being perfect.

To begin with, every sphere of people’s life is dominated by science and technology. Right from the beginning of people’s lives, they are dependent on science as humans are produced in the laboratories. Thanks to “Bokanovsky’s Process,” “making ninety-six human beings grow where only one grew before” (Huxley 17) becomes possible. What follows is that, the institution of family does not exist and children are not acquainted with the notion of parenthood. Children wear different colours of clothes according to their social groups. In order to make them satisfied with their position in the society, during the first thirty months of their lives they receive education on “Elementary Class Consciousness” by means of hypnopedia. For example, Beta children find out that Alpha children work hard as they are clever, Beta are lucky because they do not work so hard and are better then Gammas, Deltas and Epsilons who are the worst. What is more, children are prepared to take a certain place in the hierarchy. For instance, to prevent Delta children from loving books and flowers, they are exposed to electric shocks every time they encounter them. Consequently, they are conditioned to hate these objects so they can focus on working.
Furthermore, the basic idea of the World State is to control the society by providing it with artificial pleasures. One of the Controllers, Mustafa Mond, states that in his country: “People are happy; they get what they want, and they never want what they can’t get” (Huxley 194). One of the means of deluding people is stupefying them with drugs. Soma is used daily in order to kill real emotions and feelings. “Christianity without tears—that’s what soma is” (Huxley 209) explained Mustafa Mond. As a substitute for religious gatherings, there are “Solidarity Services” celebrating the Ford’s day. All the members drink from one “loving cup” which is supposed to encourage them into participating in promiscuous sexual encounters. Moreover, it is appropriate to hallucinate as a result of taking soma. Promiscuity is a social norm, and those, as for example Bernard Marx, who do not have many sexual relationships, are treated as misfits. Children are forced to take part in erotic plays to make them used to sexuality whereas adults apart from the daily portions of soma are supplied with sex-hormone chewing gum.

What is more, new technological inventions help to maintain the power in the state. The citizens use helicopters and taxicopters as a means of transport. After work, they are expected to play some games like obstacle golf or electro magnetic. Orchestras are replaced by the synthetic music machines and the lyrics of the songs reflected the superficial reality. For example: “Hug me till you drug me, honey; (...) Love’s as good as soma” (Huxley 150). Another pastime is watching feelies. The plots of the films are as simple as the whole ideology of the World State and concerned mostly with technology and sexuality. It is also a way of experiencing artificial pleasure as the viewers can feel the actors kissing. As Varricchio rightly noticed Huxley emphasizes the role of the media “as essential means for distorting reality” (Varricchio 98).

However, the image of this ”perfect” society is not totally positive because there is a big price which has to be paid for being a part of the T-model civilization; dehumanization.
To question the organization of the World State, Huxley introduces the Savage Reservation inhabited by the Indians. Linda, a Beta, gets lost on a trip and is forced to live among the Indians. It is a real humiliation to her as she gets pregnant with one of the directors and is unable to go to the Abortion Centre. Found after many years, she goes back to the World State, as she can not stand the conditions in which people live in the Reservation. “Everything they did was mad,” she says. She is disguised by the fact that “they [were] having children all the time- like dogs” (Huxley 114). What is more, as she believes promiscuity to be a social norm, she does not understand why other women despise her for sleeping with their husbands. Being used to the fact that there is always soma to “give you a holiday from the facts and (…) to calm your anger” (Huxley 209), she cannot stand the reality and gets addicted to some Indian drugs. Going back to her old life is not easy, as she is overweight and old which is not accepted by the citizens of the World State. Finally, she overdoses on soma and dies in hospital, gazing at the screen of a TV and reciting the slogans of the World State.

A society provided with artificial pleasures is also deprived of feelings. John, “the Savage,” who is brought up among the Indians does not accept the dehumanized world of his mother. He prefers the life of human truths than “sitting in a pneumatic chair, with his arm around a girl’s waist, sucking away his sex- hormone chewing- gum and looking at the feelies” (Huxley 207). He does not want to live in the world, in which normal human things, such as breast-feeding, are considered to be disgusting. In the consumerist society of soma and sex, there is no place for real emotions. “The greatest care is taken to prevent you from loving any one too much” (Huxley 209) said Mustafa Mond. Even children are taught not to be sensitive to humans’ death as they visit Hospitals for the Dying with the school trips. There are no family bonds and that is why Linda does not wish John to call her “mother.”

Bertrand Russell states that ” Utopias are written in order to make us (…) unhappy” (210). Indeed, Huxley’s image of “fordian” society is rather pessimistic. Although on the
surface, the citizens seem to be happy, in fact they hide real feelings by taking soma and Violent Passion Surrogate which is a physiological equivalent of fear and rage. Total control through science and media produce the society of ignorant people with no sense of history. Dehumanization is clearly the result of overusing the possibilities of science. The organization of the social order in the World State, although exaggerated, shows that future developments do not always give positive results. Huxley clearly presents certain concerns about scientific research which controlled by the powerful states may lead to the degradation of humanity.
2.3 Nineteen Eighty-Four - a totalitarian society

George Orwell’s image of dystopian society presented in Nineteen Eighty-Four reminds us of the totalitarian regimes in Germany and the Soviet Union after the World War II. These ideologies were based on personality cult, propaganda, terror and surveillance. Public and private behaviour was regulated by the state and the notion of freedom was abolished. As O’Brien, one of the characters of Nineteen Eighty-Four, states “If you want the picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever” (Orwell 280).

To begin with, the society of Oceania is ruled by a god-like figure, Big Brother. Although the leader of the state is never seen by anyone, his image is present in the media all the time. His face appears on the posters, telescreens, even on the front pages of the children’s books. Like in all totalitarian regimes, the tendency to worship the leader is also visible in Nineteen Eighty-Four. As the reader discovers: “Big Brother is infallible and all-powerful. Every success, every achievement, every victory, every scientific discovery, all knowledge, all wisdom, all happiness, all virtue, are held to issue directly from his leadership and inspiration” (Orwell 216). The citizens of Oceania are almost hypnotized by his image and keep chanting his name in public. However, it is a figure which stirs up negative feelings as well. Winston Smith turns all his hatred towards the figurehead who torments him even in his dreams.

What is more, the totalitarian ideology of Oceania is Ingsoc, which in Newspeak, the language invented by the party, means English Socialism. The society consists of three levels. On the top of the hierarchy, there is The Inner Party which constitutes only two percent of the whole society. The members of this party rule the state and are privileged to turn off the omnipresent screens and receive more goods, such as wine or sugar, than other people. The
main protagonist, Winston Smith belongs to the middle class, the Outer Party, which is under constant surveillance. Moreover, members of the upper and middle class are assigned to their jobs in four ministries of Oceania. The Ministry of Peace is concerned with the constant wars. The Ministry of Plenty controls the food and goods rations. The Ministry of Truth is responsible for rewriting history, whereas The Ministry of Love takes care of monitoring, arresting and torturing people. As in every hierarchical society, there is also some lower class in Oceania. Eighty five percent of the society belongs to the Proles who live in separate districts and are not monitored by the Party. The narrator suggests that only the proles stay human because their real emotions are not suppressed by the surveillance (Orwell 172).

Orwell’s image of the society is rather frightening because, as Richard Cowper rightly notices, the author wants to” push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people’s idea of the kind of society they should strive after”(1). In fact, the atmosphere of Oceania is very oppressive. London presented by Orwell is a gloomy place, full of slums, rats and “puddles of filthy water here and there among the cobbles”(Orwell 86). The criminality rate is very high and the citizens are supposed to watch the criminals’ hanging. Poverty is especially visible in the proles’ districts where rocket bombs fall demolishing whole houses. Besides, living conditions even for the Outer Party members are extremely poor and rations of food are smaller and smaller.

Moreover, totalitarianism in Oceania is also indicated by the psychological manipulation of the citizens. The Ministry of Truth is responsible for propaganda in the state. The history books are constantly rewritten, “the past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, and the lie became the truth” (Orwell 78). From new books written in Newspeak people find out that life before the Revolution was much harder and the living conditions incomparably worse. In the new reality people are supposed to call everyone a “comrade” but in fact no one is trustworthy. Winston lives in constant fear even of his neighbors, the Parsons, who can
work for the Inner Party, but in fact are reported to the Thought Police by their own children. The influence of the Party is so significant that the family relations are undermined as children “seek surrogate parents in the state or in the Big Brother figures” (Holderness 87).

Not only are people manipulated, but they are also under constant surveillance. There are telescreens “with [their] never-sleeping ear[s]” (Orwell 174) in every house of the middle class citizens and that is why the idea of privacy must go into oblivion. Besides an organization called the Thought Police looks for the enemies of the Party. Even desire is thoughtcrime in Oceania and a strange facial expression can be a reason for being arrested. People are forced to control their nervous system, let alone their private emotions. “A party member lives from birth to death under the eye of the Thought Police” (Orwell 219). Furthermore, it is common that some people disappear at night and no one knows what happens to them, they “vaporize”.

The totalitarian regime is also expressed by means of the terror and violence used in treatment of Oceania’s citizens. The Party controls both people’s minds and also their bodies. All the people who commit some crimes are transferred to the Ministry of Love, a building without any windows, where they are interrogated, beaten and tortured until they betray their companions. The enduring physical pain may break even the most rebellious spirits and lead many of the prisoners to thoughts about suicide. “A kick from a guard’s boot had broken the fingers of one of his hands. They dragged him to his feet,” relates the narrator (Orwell 249).

Orwell’s vision of a totalitarian regime seems to be rather extreme, but in fact contains many elements of the communist and fascist ideologies, such as a lack of individual freedom, leader worship, terror and surveillance. The creation of Oceania is a clear warning against totalitarian tendencies common in the 1930s and 1940s which would prevent “individual human life with its drives, its intellectual independence and its sense of situation in time and in culture” (Fowler 185).
Dystopias usually portray those societies in which the idea of individual freedom is suppressed. In the futuristic worlds of Orwell, Huxley and Atwood there is no tolerance for any individual thoughts or personal feelings. Not only is the individual believed to be the state’s property, but also their emotions. That is why the notion of individuality is endangered. However, the oppressive regimes influence different people in distinct ways. Some of them look for the slightest opportunity to rebel, others stay submissive and accept the new social orders.

Offred, the main protagonist of Margaret Atwood’s novel titled *The Handmaid’s Tale* represents a rather passive attitude towards the powerful theocratic Republic of Gilead. After the first unsuccessful attempt to escape from the country with her family, she gives up and succumbs to the overwhelming state’s influence. Although Offred proves her fertility by having a daughter before the introduction of the new system, she still has to confirm it by bearing a child for her Commander. She completely loses her will to oppose the humiliating circumstances when she gets into sexual but at the same time emotional relationship with Nick, the chauffeur. She says: “The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border of freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him” (Atwood 348). Undoubtedly, she is a kind of a passive character who adapts herself to the new circumstances and accepts her fate easily. Some critics, such as Ann Howells, state that telling the story by Offred is the only way to resist the oppression (127) but this opinion does not convince me. Naturally, writing the story may be considered to be some kind of psychological survival but in fact it cannot be the only way to fight against the system. As an
example there are some members of the underground organization Mayday, such as Offlen, who do their best to resist the regime and refuse to take a conformist attitude.

Similarly, the main protagonist of Orwell’s dystopia, starts writing a diary as a means of resistance to the Party. As Eleonora Rao rightly notes: “In Ninety-Eighty Four writing is depicted as a subversive act against the dictatorship”(78). Indeed, in the country where even thinking about rebellion is punished with torture or death, printing a capitalized caption “down with Big Brother” requires a great deal of courage. But in contrast to Offred, Winston does not moderate his ambitions to the sole action of keeping a diary. He looks for the slightest chance to go against the state’s orders, as “anything that hinted at corruption always filled him with a wild hope” (Orwell 131). In other words, he breaks a number of laws: he turns all his hatred towards Big Brother during the Two Minute Hate, falls in love, rents a room in the proles’ district and hides his affair with Julia. What is more, Winston keeps looking for an ally in order to join a network of conspirators ruled by Goldstein who aims at overthrowing the state. When he finds out that Julia is against the Party, he does not hesitate to get into a relationship with her. “He was abusing Big Brother, he was denouncing the dictatorship of the Party (…) he was advocating freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of thought” (Orwell 14). He also follows O’Brien as he is convinced about his membership of the Brotherhood. However, Winston is misled by O’Brien who in fact is a Party member looking for the enemies of Oceania’s regime. As a result, Winston becomes a prisoner in the Ministry of Love where beaten, tortured and starved agrees to love Big Brother. The action taken by the Party is aimed at exposing the prisoner to his greatest phobia. Winston is not able to stand the sight of the rats and therefore he betrays Julia by begging his torturers to torture her.

The idea of individuality is also abandoned in the World State created by Aldous Huxley. All the citizens are conditioned to stay subservient and the idea of personal freedom
is not familiar to most of them. John, brought up among the pueblo of Malpais in the New Mexican Savage Reservation, asks some of them if they understand what manhood and freedom are but he gets no answer (Huxley 188). One of the characters, Lenina, states that she wants to be a part of the social body and she understands freedom as the possibility to be happy (89). This illustrates that fact the state has power over the citizens’ minds. However, people who lack something in this consumerist world and have some ideas of their own are transported to the islands. As an example, there is Helmholtz Watson, a super intelligent Alpha plus and a lecturer at the College of Emotional Engineering, who can notice how shallow the culture in the World State is. He cannot find the words to express the meaninglessness and emptiness of the surrounding reality and consequently chooses to travel to the Falkland Islands. In contrast, Bernard Marx, a character who at the beginning questions promiscuity and treating women as objects of pleasure lacks the courage to change anything. He is a conformist who can be easily controlled by the state.

All in all, the aforementioned examples support the fact that dystopian reality does not accept the idea of individuality and all the inhabitants of the futuristic countries are supposed to be subordinate to the state. As Orwell aptly summarizes it ”no freedom of choice in any direction whatsoever” (219) is acceptable in the dystopian reality.
Conclusion

It is a fact that the development of the dystopian genre was unavoidable because of historical changes and accelerating social trends. The reality presented in the dystopian literature is a backlash against some contemporary tendencies in politics. As an example, Margaret Atwood states that George Orwell was writing a satire about Stalin’s Soviet Union” (http://arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,,978279,00.html). Undoubtedly, the author of Nineteen Eighty Four warns the readers against the dangers of totalitarian regimes which show no respect for people’s individuality and freedom. Moreover, by depicting a hedonistic society, Aldous Huxley satirizes consumerism and expresses concerns about the commercialization of sexuality and overuse of scientific research. As rightly noticed by June Derry: “some of his projects now exist in the real world or are scientifically possible, from designer drugs to designer babies” (52-53). In contrast, Margaret Atwood portrays different dangers of the contemporary world such as sexual harassment, political ignorance, racial and religious discrimination and fundamentalism. By considering a reversal of the patriarchal system with a matriarchal one she opposes any signs of extremism. All in all, touching upon such problems may be called a positive phenomenon as it makes the readers revalue their knowledge about a history and consider the future. Raffaella Baccolini states that dystopia “is traditionally a bleak, depressing genre with no space left for hope in the story” (520) but in my opinion it should not sink into oblivion as it may constitute an effective warning to the future generations.
Works Cited

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


